Material Falsity and Error in Descartes' Meditations

Cecilia Wee

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Descartes's account of material falsity constitutes one of the most difficult and challenging areas in his work. Yet understanding the account is crucial to understanding his views on such important issues as representation, truth, falsehood and human error. This book is a sustained exploration of material falsity and its importance to Descartes's overall philosophy.

Cecilia Wee here approaches Descartes's *Meditations* as an intellectual journey, wherein Descartes's views develop and change as he makes new discoveries about self, God and matter. This is the first book to focus closely on Descartes's notion of material falsity, and it shows how his account of material falsity – and correspondingly his account of crucial notions such as truth, falsehood and error – evolves according to epistemic advances in the *Meditations*. The book also offers important new insights on the crucial role of Descartes's Third Meditation discussion of material falsity in advancing many subsequent arguments in the *Meditations*.

The book begins with an overview of recent views on Cartesian material falsity. Drawing on Suárez's work, it offers an account of key features of the Cartesian materially false idea, and the relation between such ideas and false judgments. Descartes's account of material falsity is shown to be 'dynamic', with the criteria for determining material falsity in an idea changing according to epistemic advances in the *Meditations*, and with Descartes's discussion of material falsity contributing to these advances. *Material Falsity and Error in Descartes' Meditations* traces how this discussion crucially underpins the Third Meditation proofs of God's existence, and the account of error and theodicy in the Fourth and Sixth Meditations, leading to a revisionist account of Descartes's ethics.

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For Annette Baier,
and for my children, Sarah and Matthew Lim

Contents

Abbreviations

Abbreviations for frequently cited primary texts

AT x: y	*Oeuvres de Descartes*, volume x: page y
CSM x: y	*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (I and II) volume x: page y
CSMK: y	*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (III): page y
DM x, y: z	*Disputationes Metaphysicae*, disputation x, section y: paragraph z
CD x: y	*De Civitate Dei*, book x, chapter y
SCG x: y, z	*Summa contra Gentiles*, book x: chapter y, section z

Frequently used abbreviations

ACP	Accurate Causal Portrayal account of representation
AA	The alternative account of representation (to ACP)
ideas$_m$	Ideas taken in the material sense
ideas$_o$	Ideas taken in the objective sense
ISOs	Ideas of sensible objects (mentioned in the proof of the existence of the external world in the *Meditations*)
judgements$_p$	Proper judgements (i.e. judgements made by the will)
judgements$_q$	Quasi-judgements (i.e. 'judgements' of the intellect)
PEWM	Descartes's proof of the existence of the external world in the *Meditations*
PEWP	Descartes's proof of the existence of the external world in the *Principles of Philosophy*
TMD	Descartes's key Third Meditation discussion of material falsity (found at AT 7:43–55, CSM 2:29–31)

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This book is for my children, Sarah and Matthew, whose presence has made all the difference. It is also for Annette Baier, who has been an inspiring example of how to be a philosopher, but amidst all one's philosophy, to be still a woman.

1 An Introduction to Descartes's Materially False Ideas

The importance of materially false ideas in Descartes's philosophy

Descartes distinguishes between two types of falsity in his *Meditations* – formal falsity and material falsity. In the Third Meditation, he points out that formal falsity is a feature of judgements. However, he comes to own later that there is 'another kind of falsity' – material falsity – which applies to ideas.

The argument presented in this book is that Descartes's account of falsehood and error can best be understood through an examination of his account of material falsity in ideas. While Descartes thinks that ideas cannot be 'strictly speaking' false, he also thinks that ideas that are materially false somehow provide 'material' for false judgements and error. What Descartes says about such ideas indicates that these ideas provide such material for error because they somehow fail in their representational function. An account of materially false ideas would thus involve an examination of precisely how they fail in this function. This requires one to deal with issues such as: What are the objects represented by such ideas? In what sense do these ideas fail to represent such objects? How exactly does such failure in representation lead to the making of false judgements, and hence to error? In answering these questions, one comes to a thorough understanding of the nature of Cartesian truth and falsehood, and of the elements that are involved in the making of true and false judgements.

An understanding of material falsity in ideas is thus essential for an understanding of how false judgements, and hence epistemic error, come about. The account of material falsity in ideas also helps illuminate the account of error in another way. A close examination of Descartes's account of material falsity reveals important features of his view on the metaphysical status of error and falsity. This in turn is directly relevant to understanding the precise structure of the much-discussed Third Meditation proof(s) of God's existence. It also helps illuminate Descartes's views on how human error is possible within the context of his theodicy. Recognizing how and why human error takes place within the Cartesian theodicy will reorient one's perspective of the issues at stake in the Fourth Meditation treatment of error. It also serves to make sense of Descartes's somewhat neglected discussion of the 'true errors of nature' in the Sixth Meditation, and offers insight into Descartes's ethical views.

In short, a sustained attempt to understand Descartes's account of materially false ideas by reference to the wider context of the *Meditations*, and conversely, an attempt to trace the impact of this account on the subsequent argument of the *Meditations*, will yield useful insights into Descartes's overall account of falsehood and error, as well as into his ethics. But an enterprise of this sort is relatively rare in the literature. Writers who offer a more general explication of Descartes's views seldom accord his account of materially false ideas very detailed consideration. Materially false ideas are often either briefly discussed by such commentators[1] or not mentioned at all.[2] One dictionary on Descartes (Cottingham 1993) does not include materially false ideas as an entry; and a recent book on human error in Descartes (Tierno 1997) does not mention them.

Conversely, commentators who embark on a detailed examination of Descartes's account of materially false ideas have tended to consider it in relative isolation from the rest of his views. This is to some extent because the account in itself presents a major intellectual challenge: it is obscure in the extreme, and it is not clear that it is entirely coherent. Most commentary on the issue thus focuses primarily on *making sense* of Descartes's account of material falsity. Seldom is any attempt made to address explicitly the issues of *why* it is important that one make sense of the notion, or *why* the notion is brought into play in the *Meditations* at all.

This book aims to locate the account of material falsity both within the wider account of error by Descartes, and within his views as a whole. Before one can do this, however, one needs to first understand his position on materially false ideas. The latter, as commentators who have examined the issue make clear, is indeed a challenge. Descartes's account of materially false ideas has been described as 'exceptionally difficult to understand' (Wilson 1990: 2), and 'a headache . . . if not a plain inconsistency' (Beyssade 1992: 5).

The challenges posed by Descartes's account of materially false ideas

Descartes specifically discusses materially false ideas only in the *Meditations*, and the accompanying Objections and Replies. In the Third Meditation, Descartes gives his first specific account of materially false ideas. The theologian and philosopher Antoine Arnauld (1612–1694) then criticizes this account in the Fourth Set of Objections, and Descartes defends his views in the Fourth Set of Replies.

Descartes's account of materially false ideas in the Third Meditation

At the beginning of the Third Meditation, Descartes tries to classify his thoughts and to determine which of them might properly be said to be 'bearers of truth and falsity' (AT 7: 37, CSM 2: 25). He finds that some of his thoughts are 'as-if images of things' (*tanquam rerum imagines*) – for example, when he thinks of 'a man, or a chimera, or the sky, or an angel, or God'. Only these thoughts strictly qualify as 'ideas'; and insofar as they are 'considered solely in themselves and are not referred to anything else', they cannot 'strictly speaking' be false.

Then there are other thoughts with 'additional forms':

> Other thoughts have various additional forms: thus when I will or am afraid, or affirm, or deny, there is always a particular thing which I take as the object of my thought, but my thought includes something more than the likeness of that thing. Some thoughts in this category are called volitions or emotions, while others are called judgements.
>
> (AT 7: 37, CSM 2: 25–6)

Thus, such thoughts include an idea (say, of a lion) with an additional form (of fear, or desire, or judgement) towards the object of the idea. Descartes maintains that 'one need not worry about falsity' in the thoughts that involve volitions and emotions. As he points out, 'even if the things I may desire are wicked or even non-existent, that does not make it any less true that I desire them'. Thus, he concludes that 'the only remaining thoughts where I must be on my guard against making a mistake are judgements' (AT 7: 37, CSM 2: 26). It appears then that the only thoughts which are 'bearers of truth and falsity' are judgements.

A couple of pages later, however, Descartes qualifies this view. Upon subjecting his 'ideas of corporeal things' to scrutiny, he concludes that

> The things which I perceive clearly and distinctly in them are very few in number. The list comprises size, or extension in length, breadth and depth; shape, which is a function of the boundaries of this extension; position, which is a relation between various items possessing shape; and motion, or change in position . . . But as for all the rest, . . . I think of these only in a very confused and obscure way, to the extent that I do not even know whether they are true or false, that is, whether the ideas I have of them are ideas of real things or no things.
>
> (AT 7: 43, CSM 2: 30)*[3]

After dividing his ideas of corporeal things into these two classes, he then significantly states:

> For although, as I have noted before, falsity in the strict sense, or formal falsity, can only occur in judgements, there is another kind of falsity, material falsity which occurs in ideas when they represent no things as things.
>
> (AT 7: 43, CSM 2: 30)*

Descartes admits now that, although falsity 'in the strict sense' occurs only in judgements, there is a certain kind of falsity which applies to ideas (as opposed to judgements) – that is, material falsity. Such falsity occurs when ideas 'represent no things as things'.

He then uses a pair of 'confused and obscure' ideas – the opposing ideas of heat and cold – to illustrate material falsity in ideas:

> For example, the ideas that I have of heat and cold contain so little clarity and distinctness that they do not enable me to tell whether cold is merely the privation

> (*privatio*) of heat or vice versa, or whether both of them are real qualities, or neither is. And since there are no ideas which are not as-if of things, if it is true that cold is nothing but the privation of heat, the idea which represents it to me as something real and positive deserves to be called false, and the same goes for other ideas of this kind.
>
> (AT 7: 43–44, CSM 2: 30)*

Descartes had said that all ideas are 'as-if images of things', that is, an idea purports to be *of* a thing. But suppose, for instance, cold is really a privation or absence of heat. Then the idea which presents cold as if of a thing is materially false: it presents cold as if it is a thing, when cold is really a thing's absence, not a thing at all.

One of Descartes's concerns in the Third Meditation is to search for means by which he may trace the source or cause of his various ideas. His materially false ideas, he adds, are seen by 'the natural light' to 'proceed (*procedere*) from nothing', and to have their source in defect and imperfection in himself:

> if [my ideas] are false, that is, represent no things, I know by the natural light that they proceed from nothing – that is, they are in me only because of a deficiency and lack of perfection in my nature.
>
> (AT 7: 43–44, CSM 2: 30)*

While Descartes does mention materially false ideas briefly in a later passage in the Third Meditation (AT 7: 46, CSM 2: 31), the extended passage outlined above clearly presents his key doctrines concerning material falsity in ideas – at least as they stand at the point of the Third Meditation. For convenience (and to distinguish it from the later brief mention of material falsity at AT 7: 46), I shall refer henceforth to this extended Third Meditation discussion of material falsity as TMD.

Arnauld's Fourth Set of Objections

Descartes's attempt to attribute (material) falsity to ideas was criticized by Arnauld in the Fourth Set of Objections. Arnauld argued that it was 'inconsistent with the author's own principles'. He maintained that the notion that ideas could be materially false was incompatible with what Descartes had earlier said about the nature of ideas.

As mentioned, Descartes had said that all ideas are as-if images of things. Insofar as they are as-if images of things, they have what Margaret Wilson calls 'representational character' (Wilson 1978: 102). That is, an idea presents itself as if it is *of* a certain thing, and hence as a representation *of* that thing.

Just prior to his extended Third Meditation discussion on material falsity, Descartes had pointed out that ideas have different levels of objective reality according to what they present themselves as being of, and hence as representations of. He writes:

> But insofar as different ideas . . . represent different things, it is clear that they differ widely. Undoubtedly, the ideas which represent substances to me amount

> to something more and, so to speak, contain within themselves more objective reality than the ideas which merely represent modes or accidents. Again, the idea that gives me my understanding of a supreme God, eternal, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of all things that exist apart from him, certainly has in it more objective reality than the ideas that represent finite substances.
>
> (AT 7: 40, CSM 2: 28)

Insofar as ideas are representations of different things, they contain or have different levels of objective reality. For example, an idea that presents itself as being of a finite substance has more objective reality than an idea that presents itself as being of a mode or accident.

Arnauld (not unjustifiably) took these passages to mean that the objective reality in an idea is *determined* by what is presented by the idea. For example, my idea of a finite substance has a certain level of objective reality in virtue of its presenting itself as being *of* a finite substance. Arnauld argued that, as the objective reality in an idea is determined by what the idea presents to me, there can never be a materially false idea. Thus, he writes:

> if cold is a privation, it cannot exist objectively in the intellect by means of an idea whose objective existence is a positive entity. Therefore, if cold is merely a privation, there cannot ever be a positive idea of it, and hence there cannot be an idea which is materially false.
>
> (AT 7: 206, CSM 2: 145)*

Arnauld points out that, if what is presented in my idea of cold is a privation or absence, then this idea of cold cannot be an idea of a positive thing. The idea, in presenting a privation, cannot ever have an (objective) reality *derived from what it presents*. We cannot have a materially false idea – an idea which represents no thing as a thing – because such an idea would have to both present a privation, and yet exhibit a positive reality derived from what it presents. There is thus no room for material falsity in ideas.

Arnauld emphasizes that his objection does not concern the issue of how an idea might represent an existing, actual object. Rather, he is concerned with the representative character *within the idea itself*, in virtue of what it presents to the thinker:

> [That there cannot ever be a materially false idea] is confirmed by the very argument which the author uses to prove that the idea of an infinite being cannot but be a true idea, since, *though I can pretend that such a being does not exist, I cannot pretend that the idea of such a being does not represent anything real to me.*
>
> The same can plainly be said of any positive idea. For *although it can be imagined that cold, which I suppose to be represented by a positive idea, is not something positive, it cannot be imagined that the idea does not represent anything real and positive to me*. For an idea is called 'positive' not in virtue of the existence it has as a mode of thinking (for in that sense all ideas would be called positive), but in

> virtue of the objective existence which it contains and which it represents to our mind. Hence the idea may perhaps not be the idea of cold, but it cannot be a false idea.
>
> (AT 7: 206, CSM 2: 145, emphases mine)

A rejoinder that one might be tempted to make to his criticisms, Arnauld points out, is this: since my idea (which represents cold as real to me) is not an idea which correctly represents actual cold, it is thereby a false idea. He responds that this solution involves a confusion between the role played by judgements, and by ideas:

> But, you may reply, [the idea of cold-as-positive] is false precisely because it is not the idea of [actual] cold. *No: it is your judgement that is false, if you judge that it is the idea of cold. The idea itself, within you, is completely true.* In the same way, the idea of God should never be called false – not even 'materially false', even though someone may transfer it to something which is not God, as idolaters have done.
>
> (AT 7: 207, CSM 2: 145–46, emphasis mine)

Finally, Arnauld points out that Descartes's view that his positive (mistaken) idea of cold 'proceed(s) from nothing' is incompatible with what he had maintained earlier in the Third Meditation. Descartes had earlier concluded in that Meditation that 'something cannot proceed from nothing' (AT 7: 40, CSM 2: 28). Arnauld argues that this principle is incompatible with what Descartes maintains about the origin of his (mistaken) idea of cold as positive:

> Again, what is the cause of the positive objective being which according to you is responsible for the idea's being materially false? 'The cause is myself' you may answer, 'in so far as I come from nothing.' But *in that case, the positive objective being of an idea can come from nothing, which violates the author's most important principles*.
>
> (AT 7: 40, CSM 2: 28, emphasis mine)

Descartes's answer in the Fourth Set of Replies

Descartes's response to Arnauld's criticisms in the Fourth Set of Replies seems obscure in the extreme. On first reading it, one might be forgiven for thinking that Descartes had indeed been guilty earlier of incoherent thought, and was attempting to waffle his way out of it. Margaret Wilson describes his attempt to refute Arnauld's charges as a 'model of confusion confounded' (Wilson 1978: 110).

To begin with, the very first sentence in Descartes's reply to Arnauld on this issue seems to mark a shift from Descartes's earlier position. For, whereas Descartes had roundly asserted in TMD that ideas are materially false insofar as they 'represent nothings as things', he now appears to have softened his stance, maintaining more generally that they are false merely insofar as they provide 'material (*materia*) for error':

> The first point [that Arnauld deals with] is that certain ideas are materially false. As I interpret this claim, it means that the ideas are such as to provide material for error.
>
> (AT 7: 231, CSM 2: 162)*

Dealing with the issue in further detail, Descartes then goes on to suggest that Arnauld's criticisms are misdirected, because Arnauld is looking at ideas 'taken in the formal sense', whereas Descartes is dealing with ideas in quite another sense. However, Descartes's attempt to illuminate the differences between his and Arnauld's perspective on the nature of ideas is anything but helpful:

> When M. Arnauld says 'if cold is merely a privation, there cannot be an idea of cold which represents it as a positive thing', it is clear that he is dealing solely with an idea taken in the *formal* sense. Since ideas are forms of a kind, and are not composed of any matter, when we think of them as representing something we are not taking them *materially* but *formally*. If however we were considering them as not representing this or that but simply as operations of the intellect, then it could be said that we are taking them materially, but in that case they would have no reference to the truth or falsity of their objects. So I think that the only sense in which an idea is materially false is the one which I have explained. Thus, whether cold is a positive thing or a privation does not affect the idea I have of it, which remains the same as it always was. It is this idea, I claim, which can provide material for error if it is true that cold is a privation and does not have as much reality as heat; for if I consider the ideas of cold and heat just as I received them from my senses, I am unable to tell that one idea represents more reality than the other.
>
> (AT 7: 232, CSM 2: 162–3)*

This passage, once again, appears perilously close to a backtrack. Descartes in the Third Meditation had asserted that materially false ideas are false in virtue of the fact that they 'represent no things as things'. But Descartes now maintains that whenever 'we think of ideas as representing something, we are taking them formally, not materially'. It appears, then, all ideas *insofar as we think of them as representational* are ideas in the formal sense. Moreover, Descartes concedes to Arnauld that these ideas, taken formally, can never be materially false (for he says that Arnauld's criticisms against the possibility of material falsity would be valid if Descartes were looking at ideas in the formal sense). But if ideas insofar as they are seen as representational are ideas in the formal sense, and ideas in the formal sense can never be materially false, it follows that ideas insofar as they are seen as representational can never be materially false. How then can one have materially false ideas – in other words, ideas that are taken as representational (as 'representing no things as things') and are materially false precisely because they represent wrongly?

Now, it seems, Descartes has to make space for material falsity in ideas after this concession to Arnauld that one can never have ideas that are materially false in the sense that they represent wrongly. A glance at his subsequent account of material

falsity again reinforces the suspicion that he does this by withdrawing from his earlier definition of it. For now Descartes no longer maintains that the idea of cold would be materially false if it represents no thing as a thing; instead, he notes that the idea of cold is 'materially false' merely because, if he considers his ideas of heat and cold 'just as I received them from my senses', he is 'unable to tell' if one represents more reality to him than the other (AT 7: 232–3, CSM 2: 163). Wilson points out that Descartes now thinks that an idea is materially false, not in virtue of its content representing wrongly, but in virtue of its content being obscure:

> [M]y critic asks what the idea of cold, which I described as materially false, represents to me. If it represents a privation, he says, it is true; and if it represents a positive entity, then it is not the idea of cold. This is right; but my only reason for calling the idea 'materially false' is that, *owing to the fact that it is obscure and confused, I am unable to judge whether or not what it represents to me is something positive which exists outside of my sensation.* And hence I may be led to *judge* that it is something positive though in fact it may merely be a privation . . .
>
> (AT 7: 234, CSM 2: 164, emphases mine)

Whereas Descartes had earlier said that it is the (materially false) idea itself that represents wrongly, he now appears to have accepted Arnauld's point that it is the judgement that decides wrongly what the idea represents. The idea, say, of cold is merely obscure and confused. It is one's judgement that makes the mistake when it decides that the idea represents something positive.

Wilson has succinctly expressed some of the (apparent) difficulties that Descartes gets himself into by trying to avoid the criticism levelled by Arnauld:

> Now in the Fourth Replies, ideas are said to be materially false *merely* because they are obscure – not because they represent *nullas res tanquam res* . . . This must, I think, be viewed as a significant departure from the doctrine of the Meditations. And while it may get Descartes out of one difficulty [i.e. that mentioned by Arnauld], it does get him into another. For now the *same feature* of ideas, their 'obscurity', is being assigned the tasks of explaining *both* why I 'cannot tell' whether or not the idea exhibits something real, and why I judge that it does. Further, even if we were able somehow to resolve the appearance of inconsistency on this point, we are left with a very weak 'explanation' of our false judgements concerning the qualities of objects. For, while the representational character of ideas was said in the *Meditations* actually to mislead us on the matter of objective reality, the 'obscurity' of ideas can be said only to provide an 'occasion' or opportunity for error.
>
> (1978: 115–16)

In sum, Wilson sees two difficulties with Descartes's account. First, if the idea's obscurity is to explain why one is unclear about whether it represents anything real, then how can such obscurity also explain why it *misleads* one into judging that it

does represent a real thing? If the idea is obscure in the sense that one feels unsure about whether (or what) it represents, it would not tempt or mislead one into making any definite judgement at all. Second, there is a watering down of the claim of the Third Meditation: in the latter, the materially false idea was seen as positively misleading the thinker by representing wrongly, whereas the Fourth Replies sees the obscurity of the materially false idea as merely providing opportunity or occasion for error.

Descartes ends with a 'refutation' of Arnauld's final criticism – namely, that the account of material falsity is incompatible with the assertion that something cannot arise from nothing. This refutation once again seems to re-assert the 'revised' account of material falsity, in which the material falsity in an idea is due merely to its obscurity (rather than its representing no things as things):

> [I]n asking what is the cause of the positive objective being which, in my view is responsible for the idea being materially false, my critic has raised an improper question. For *I do not claim that an idea's material falsity arises from some positive entity; it arises solely from the obscurity of the idea* – although this does have something positive as its underlying subject – namely the actual sensation involved.
>
> Now this positive entity exists in me in so far as I am something real. But *the obscurity of the idea is the only thing that leads me to judge that the idea of the sensation of cold represents some object called 'cold' which is located outside me*; and this obscurity in the idea does not have a real cause but arises simply from the fact that my nature is not perfect in all respects.
>
> (AT 7: 235, CSM 2: 164, emphasis mine)

After producing this very detailed reply to Arnauld's criticism – a reply which seems to be not only inconsistent, but often obscure – Descartes concludes by stating, with a staggering firmness, that he has shown in his reply that his account of material falsity 'does not in any way violate my fundamental principles' (AT 7: 234–5, CSM 2: 164). His conviction can scarcely be shared by the reader who first encounters these passages.

Interpreting Descartes's account of materially false ideas

Before one can examine the implications of Descartes's account of materially false ideas on the rest of his views, one needs first to understand what the account is. Offering a coherent interpretation obviously poses a formidable challenge. In this last section, I outline briefly the approach I will adopt in interpreting this account.

Many interpretations of Descartes in the fairly recent past involved a close analysis of his written texts, with relatively less attention to the intellectual background against which he wrote these works. Such an approach was perhaps best exemplified by Guéroult's magisterial *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons* (Guéroult 1953), which paid extremely close attention to the text and structure of the *Meditations* in elucidating Descartes's views.[4]

This approach is perhaps less common now.[5] Current commentary on Descartes has often focused on interpreting his writings within the context of the intellectual concerns of his own time. Descartes's various works are elucidated in terms of how they respond to, and develop out of, the positions held by scientists, mathematicians and philosophers prior to and during his own life-time.[6]

In my interpretation of Descartes's account of materially false ideas, I merge both these approaches. Where appropriate, Descartes's debt to his intellectual peers and predecessors (such as Augustine and Suárez) will be examined. In this connection, particular attention will be paid to Disputation 9 of Suárez's *Disputationes Metaphysicae.* In his attempt in the Fourth Set of Replies to elucidate his notion of materially false ideas to Arnauld, Descartes claims in his concluding sentence that he had found that Suárez had used the word 'materially' in a sense 'identical' to his own (AT 7: 235, CSM 2: 164). He then goes to the length of citing the precise passage in which this identical usage occurs – that is, Disputation 9, Section 2, Number 4 (hereafter cited as DM 9, 2: 4).

While commentators have noted and explored Suárez's influence on Descartes's account of material falsity, surprisingly few have focused on DM 9, 2: 4 and its links with Descartes's views on material falsity. Alanen finds the reference to DM 9, 2: 4 'not very helpful' (Alanen 1994: 240), while Secada suggests that Descartes's account of material falsity departs considerably from Suárez's in that passage (Secada 2000: 100).

But Descartes's claim that he is using the notion of material falsity in a sense identical to Suárez's in DM 9, 2: 4 should be taken very seriously. Descartes refers us in the Fourth Replies to this very specific and relatively short section, in a work whose sheer volume must command respect. While he might well have cited Suárez's work to make his own account of material falsity more authoritative, he would hardly have gone to the lengths of referring Arnauld (and other readers of the *Meditations*) to the *precise* chapter and verse, unless he had thought there was a genuine and quite obvious similarity between Suárez's position and his own. Clearly, he must have thought that this appeal to Suárez would help illuminate his position on material falsity, and perhaps pre-empt the sorts of misunderstandings that had arisen with Arnauld. As this book will show, DM 9, 2: 4 does indeed offer illumination on the Cartesian account of material falsity. Descartes does in fact use the word 'materially' in much the same way as Suárez in that passage.

Apart from paying some attention to Descartes's sixteenth-century late-Scholastic sources, close attention will also be paid to the actual context and structure of Descartes's arguments. Such attention is particularly indispensable in considering text from a work like the *Meditations*. As various commentators have pointed out, the *Meditations* is structured as an intellectual journey, in which Descartes destroys preconceived opinion, and builds, step by step, a new understanding of self, God and the physical world. Descartes's epistemic status alters as he comes to a new understanding of these issues. A close analysis of the text, emphasizing attention to the structure of the *Meditations*, is thus crucial in an interpretation of Descartes's account of materially false ideas.

The shifts in epistemic perspective effected in the course of the *Meditations* have not sufficiently been considered in the recent literature on Descartes's materially

false ideas. Thus, it is often assumed that there is a *single* account of what makes an idea materially false. But I will argue that Descartes's account of what makes an idea materially false changes in accord with the changes in Descartes's epistemic status in the course of the *Meditations*.

As a preliminary to proferring my own reading of Cartesian material falsity, I examine in the next chapter some major positions that have been taken recently on material falsity in recent times. Locating these various positions in the available logical space on the issue of material falsity will make it easier to place my own position within the same space later. Moreover, some of the problems that might arise on these readings would be eliminated if one accepts that Descartes's account of material falsity changes in the course of the *Meditations*.

Before proceeding to do this, a final note is in order. It is now customary for commentators to distinguish between Descartes himself, author of the *Meditations* (and much else), and the meditator who undertakes the intellectual voyage of the *Meditations*.[7] This has the admittedly important advantage of distinguishing the views that Descartes actually held from the views held by the meditator on his way to enlightenment (which may not have been shared by Descartes).

However, after careful consideration, this distinction has been dispensed with in this book. First, continual shifts in references from Descartes to the meditator (and back again) may be tedious, and perhaps distracting, for the reader. (For instance, comparisons between the Third Meditation and Fourth Replies, or between the Fourth Meditation and Descartes's ethics, can become rather tortuous if one has to keep highlighting the move between Descartes's voice and the meditator's.) Second, while there may be a number of views expressed by the meditator that Descartes did not hold, there are also a substantial set of views that they held in common (this is true even of the earlier portions of the *Meditations*). If one distinguishes between the two *personae*, one may end up having to flag every single view that Descartes and the meditator held in common, and every view that they did *not* share. Worse still, each claim that a position is held by both Descartes and the meditator, or by only one of them, may have to be justified individually.

In view of these considerations, I have elected to follow the many earlier writers (such as Curley 1978, Kenny 1968, Williams 1978, and Wilson 1978) who assume the intellectual voyager of the *Meditations* to be Descartes himself. Making this assumption has not resulted in too much loss in interpretative significance in their works. In adopting a similar strategy, I trust to the reader's good sense, and hope that it will be evident to her, from the specific arguments in the book, which intermediate positions held in the course of the *Meditations* are not Descartes's final ones.

2 'Static' Interpretations of Materially False Ideas – A Survey

'Dynamic' vs. 'static' interpretations

Recognition of the changes in Descartes's epistemic status in the course of the *Meditations* is essential for a proper understanding of his account of materially false ideas, and hence of his views on representation, truth, and falsehood.

I call an interpretation that maintains that the changes in Descartes's epistemic status have an impact on his account of materially false ideas a 'dynamic' one. More specifically, a dynamic interpretation maintains that the criteria that determine an idea as materially false change in the course of the *Meditations*, according to changes in Descartes's state of knowledge.

In contrast, a 'static' interpretation of materially false ideas maintains that the criteria that determine an idea as materially false remain unchanged in the course of the *Meditations*, despite changes in Descartes's epistemic status. Many commentators who write on Cartesian materially false ideas assume a static interpretation.

This chapter examines some key 'static' readings of Cartesian material falsity. As mentioned, Descartes maintains in the Third Meditation that all ideas are *tanquam rerum imagines*. That is, an idea presents itself as if it is *of* a certain thing, and hence as a representation *of* that thing. Commentators generally accept that material falsity in an idea involves some sort of breakdown in the representative function of that idea. But what sort of breakdown? The key 'static' readings surveyed here – by Wilson, Normore, Wells and Bolton – differ concerning the nature of the representational breakdown in a materially false idea, and taken together, form a reasonably representative sample of the possible 'static' interpretations on Cartesian material falsity.

As mentioned, this chapter is primarily concerned with stage-setting. This preliminary survey of 'static' readings will make it easier subsequently to locate my 'dynamic' reading of materially false ideas (found in the next chapter) relative to these readings. The survey also helps make clear the various issues concerning representation in Cartesian ideas, which have to be dealt with in any discussion of Cartesian material falsity, and which will be taken up in the next chapter.

Wilson's double-representation view

Wilson, in a paper subsequent to her 1978 book, shifts from her view that the passages on material falsity from the Third Meditation and Fourth Set of Replies are incompatible, maintaining that her previous view was uncharitable (Wilson 1990: 18). She suggests that coherent sense can be made of these texts if we see Descartes as using the term 'represents' in two senses. Wilson quotes from TMD:

> material falsity . . . occurs in ideas when they represent no things as things. For example, the ideas which I have of heat and cold contain so little clarity and distinctness that they do not enable me to tell whether cold is merely the privation of heat or vice versa, or whether both of them are real qualities, or neither is. And since there can be no ideas which are not as it were of things, if it is true that cold is nothing but the privation of heat, the idea which represents it to me as something real and positive deserves to be called false . . .
>
> (AT 7: 43–4, CSM 2: 30)*

Wilson sees these statements as implying that Descartes thinks sensations are representative in two respects:

> First, they are *ideas* of cold, heat and so forth (whatever these may be, and whether or not they are 'real qualities'). Second they present heat, cold etc. to us *in a certain way, as being such and such*; specifically (since all ideas are 'as-if of things') they represent them to us as 'real and positive qualities'.
>
> (Wilson 1990: 4)

The term 'represent' thus carries two loads. Any idea represents in two respects: first, it represents what it refers to, and second, it represents what it presents.

It is the double-representative nature of ideas, Wilson argues, that gives rise to material falsity in ideas. Because what an idea referentially represents may not be what it presentationally represents, there is scope or 'material' for error, when we assume that what the idea presents *is* what it referentially represents. For instance, suppose that cold is really a privation, and I have an idea of cold as positive being. My idea of cold is an idea of actual cold (a privation), in the sense that it referentially represents actual cold. But my idea of cold is in another sense not an idea of actual cold, since what it *presents* is a real thing. However, I may assume that what the idea presents (cold-as-real) is what it refers to (actual cold) – and so may make a mistaken judgement that actual cold is a real thing. Thus, my idea of cold as positive is materially false, for it provides the material for my false judgement that actual cold is a real thing.

Wilson argues that, on this account of representation, one can make coherent sense of both TMD and Descartes's reply to Arnauld's objections. Arnauld had argued that there cannot be any materially false ideas, because all ideas must represent what they do represent truly. His stance, Wilson writes, requires commitment to the following assumption:

> For anything n, of which it is true that n is P, then any idea which exhibits something to the mind as not-P cannot be an idea of n
>
> (Wilson 1990: 6)

Wilson interprets Descartes's answer to Arnauld in the Fourth Set of Replies as essentially a refutation of this assumption of Arnauld's. For Arnauld, an idea must present what it refers to as it is. But on Descartes's hybrid notion of representation, 'an idea's being an idea of n – its [referring to] n – does *not* preclude that the idea presents n as other than it is' (Wilson 1990: 7).

Descartes's answer to Arnauld in the Fourth Set of Replies can be read as showing a continued commitment to this stance, expressed earlier in the Third Meditation. For instance, Wilson examines the passage in which Descartes rejects Arnauld's view that 'the idea of cold is cold itself insofar as it is objectively in the understanding'. Here Descartes writes:

> for it often happens in obscure and confused ideas, among those of which heat and cold are included, that they are referred to something other than that of which they are truly the ideas . . . [Thus], if cold is only a privation, the idea of cold is not cold itself, insofar as it is objectively in the understanding, but something else which I wrongly take for this privation; that is, a certain sensation which has no being outside the understanding.
>
> (AT 7: 233, Wilson's trans.)

Wilson's interpretation of this passage is as follows:

> The idea ['of cold'] is referentially the idea *of cold;* it *presents*, however, something else: a mere, if positive sensation. It thus 'provides the material' for my error of judging that what is (positively if obscurely) presented to me is what the idea refers to, viz. cold (which is in fact, in the real world, a privation).
>
> (Wilson 1990: 9)

She argues that the fact that what the idea referentially represents is not what it presentationally represents explains why Descartes can say that the idea of cold is referred to 'something other than that of which it is truly the idea'. He is not categorically accepting Arnauld's claim that if cold is a privation, a positive idea is not the idea of cold. Rather, he is 'merely agreeing that the idea would not be *presentationally* the idea of cold as it "is" in nature or *quam res*, (viz., a privation)' (Wilson 1990: 10).

Wilson's reading here is a paradigmatic 'static' reading, for it furnishes a single account of the type of representational breakdown that occurs in materially false ideas, and argues that this single interpretation can be applied consistently to what has been said about materially false ideas in both the Third Meditation and the Fourth Set of Replies. Does Wilson's 'static' account work?

One must be prepared to interpret the text liberally, writes Wilson, to accept her reading. Her reason for saying this is that, in a passage that comes a little after the one just quoted, Descartes writes:

> But [Arnauld] asks what that idea of cold represents to me, which I say is materially false: 'For if,' he says, 'it exhibits a privation, then it is true; if a positive being, then it is not the idea of cold'. *This is right* [*recte*].
>
> (AT 7: 234, emphasis mine)

Wilson admits that Descartes's agreement with Arnauld here seems 'startling'. She had argued that the Cartesian idea of cold can exhibit positive being and still be (referentially) an idea of cold, a privation – yet here we have Descartes maintaining that an idea that exhibits cold as positive being is *not* the idea of cold.

Wilson tries to get round this difficulty by suggesting that 'although Descartes seems to give away the store here, he has merely expressed himself ineptly' (Wilson 1990: 10). But the deviation in text here is serious, and does not allow of a summary dismissal. As Wilson sees it, Descartes's aim in the Fourth Set of Replies passage is to *refute* Arnauld's thesis that, if n is P, one cannot have an idea of n that exhibits it as not-P. Yet Descartes, in the above passage, seems to be *accepting* Arnauld's thesis: if n is P (that is, if cold is a privation), an idea that exhibits n as not-P is not an idea of P (that is, an idea that exhibits cold-as-positive is not an idea of cold). If Wilson is right, we find Descartes acceding to a view, right in the middle of a passage in which he is bent on refuting that same view. This seems a bit much to put down to mere ineptness of expression.

A major problem is thus posed for Wilson's interpretation by this bit of recalcitrant text. Moreover, this text would pose problems to *any* view that sees a materially false idea as (somehow) misrepresenting its object. For Wilson, material falsity comes about quite specifically from what she calls the 'double-representative' nature of ideas: when what an idea represents in a presentational way is not what it represents in a referential way (and we assume that the two are the same). But any view that essentially holds that a materially false idea is one that picks out a particular referent, but somehow misrepresents it, would also run into difficulties with this bit of text. For what Descartes seems to be saying here is that an idea that (ostensibly) mis-portrays its referent does not actually have that object as its referent at all.

A second difficulty is as follows. On Wilson's reading, Descartes would hold that an idea of n can present n as other than it is. The question one then needs to ask is this: 'what *is* it for an idea to be an idea of (say) cold, if it is not to present cold as it is?' (Wilson 1990: 10) On Arnauld's purely presentational view, there was no difficulty in determining the referent of the idea: it is simply what the idea itself presents. But Wilson's view requires that what the idea refers to is a distinct question from what it presents. Wilson acknowledges that a problem with her reading is that it is then difficult to determine what it is that an idea referentially represents, given Descartes's other views.

She argues that the most likely account of referential representation – a 'causal' account – would not work given Descartes's other views. On such an account, what an idea referentially represents would be its cause (or cause under normal conditions). Thus, for example:

> for my idea of cold referentially to represent a certain physical state is just for that idea to be caused – in the 'right' way – by that state, whatever it might be.
>
> (Wilson 1990: 11)

There are two difficulties with this account. First, Descartes seems willing to accept that cold might be a privation. It follows that he would be willing to accept that there might be privative causes: if one's idea of cold refers to a privation, then this idea is caused by a privative state. Wilson thinks the notion of a privative cause is an odd one (though she thinks it might ultimately be 'tolerable' – Wilson 1990: 11).

Second, and more problematically, Descartes obviously draws a distinction between reality and existence. Wilson quotes the famous passage from the *Conversation with Burman*:

> There is . . . material for error, even if I refer [my ideas] to no things outside me, since I can err with respect to their nature itself. For instance, if I consider the idea of colour, and say that it is a thing, a quality, or rather the colour itself, which is represented by this idea, is such; or if I say that white is a quality, even if I refer that idea to no thing outside myself, and say or suppose that nothing is white, I can nevertheless err in the abstract, and about whiteness itself and its nature or idea.
>
> (AT 5: 152, Wilson's translation)

She concludes that 'the issue of whether certain putative qualities are "real" is distinct . . . from the issue of whether anything possessing the qualities in question actually exists' (Wilson 1990: 4).

Descartes's reality–existence distinction would cause difficulties for the causal account of reference. As she argues, the passage from *Burman* shows that:

> My (materially false) ideas of cold and white are ideas of cold and white, it seems, even if no physical things exist, and hence even if there are no instantiations of these qualities as they really are.
>
> (Wilson 1990: 11)

Wilson is 'pessimistic' that such non-existent 'entities' as 'real cold' and 'real whiteness' can be cast as causes: the unlikelihood of such non-instantiated entities as causes is a difficulty for this account.

Similar difficulties would arise, Wilson maintains, if one tried to construe referential representation as 'demonstrative':

> according to Descartes, I can refer a sensation to 'a part of the physical world' which in a quite ordinary sense fails to exist. To mention one of his favourite examples, I can point to where an amputated limb should be, indicating the 'location' of a pain. (So 'what is going on *there*' will not always 'pick out' the real state of the world which my sensation represents referentially.)
>
> (Wilson 1990: 11)

Wilson attributes the difficulties in determining what it is that an idea referentially represents to inadequacies in Descartes's thought. She writes:

> On the whole I suspect that the causal account was influential in Descartes's thought, even if he was unable to develop it fully . . . Beyond this . . . I'm unable further to clarify the hybrid conception of representation I've attributed to Descartes. I can only claim that it, or something like it, does seem necessary to make good sense of his response to Arnauld's objection.
>
> (ibid.)

I argue later that some of Wilson's outlined difficulties in determining what an idea referentially represents do not stem from inadequacies in Descartes's own thought, but from a 'static' reading of the text.

Meanwhile, note that this difficulty outlined by Wilson applies (once again) not only to her account of material falsity, but to any account that holds (in some version) that the representational breakdown in a materially false idea involves a *misrepresentation* of the idea's object or referent. Any version of this view has to give an account of the relationship that determines that a failed portrayal by an idea is a failed portrayal of *that* particular object.

The difficulties over determining what the referent of a materially false idea might be may suggest that the representational breakdown in materially false ideas does not involve the misrepresentation by the idea of the idea's referent. This might suggest the following alternative account of what the representational breakdown consists in: in other words, that a materially false idea is one that does not have any referent at all. I now examine this alternative.

Normore on objective reality and material falsity

Calvin Normore elucidates Descartes's account of how (and what) ideas represent by relating it to the views of his late-Scholastic predecessors (Normore 1986). While his views on this issue are bold, interesting, and influential, I shall limit myself to discussing his account of those ideas that *fail* to represent correctly.

Normore maintains that an idea is (materially) false when it fails to refer to any object. This reading receives strong support from TMD, which describes such ideas as 'those which represent non-things [*nullas res*] as things', and which subsequently states that:

> if [these ideas] are false, that is, they represent no things, I know by the natural light that they proceed from nothing [*nihilo*] . . .
>
> (AT 7: 44, CSM 2: 30)*

These passages indicate that Descartes held materially false ideas to be those that do not represent a thing at all – that is, those that fail to pick out or refer to any object.

Like Wilson (in both book and paper), Normore points out that there is a distinction between reality and existence for Descartes. Referring to the same passage from

the *Conversation with Burman*, he concludes that 'an idea is not materially false because it represents a nonexistent as an existent, but . . . when what it represents (i.e., what it purports to be an idea of) does not have the *reality* it seems to have' (Normore 1986: 226). For Normore, then, an idea is materially false and has no objective reality when it fails to refer to any *real* (though not necessarily existing) object.

Normore argues for this reading of the representational breakdown in materially false ideas as follows. He points out that Descartes first distinguishes between the formal and objective reality of an idea. Insofar as ideas are all modes of thought, they are equal in their formal reality. But insofar as such ideas are 'as-if images' of different things – that is, purport to represent different things – they have different levels of objective reality. Descartes then goes on to establish a principle connecting causes to their effects:

> For it is manifest to the natural light that there should be at least as much being in an efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause.
>
> (AT 7: 40, Normore's translation)

He then extends this principle to the objective reality in ideas, and the causes of such objective reality. Again, Normore points out, Descartes thinks the cause of the objective reality in an idea must be formal:

> Nor ought I to suspect that since the reality which I consider in my ideas may only be objective, it is not necessary that the same reality may be formally in the causes but suffices if it is in them also objectively. For inasmuch as this objective mode of being applies to ideas from their nature so the formal mode of being applies to the causes of the ideas, at least the first and principal one from their nature.
>
> (ibid.)

Given the conclusion that the objective reality of an idea must have a cause of at least equal formal reality, and Descartes's later assertion in TMD that 'materially false ideas proceed from nothing', it follows that a materially false idea is one that has no objective reality. Normore writes:

> from the [assertion that false ideas proceed from nothing] and the principle that there is no more reality objectively in the effect than formally in the cause we can conclude . . . that *there is no more than zero reality objectively in false*[1] *ideas.* It follows . . . that we must distinguish the representative character of Cartesian ideas from their objective reality. All ideas represent, or purport to be about something. Some ideas really represent something, and it is those that have objective reality.
>
> (Normore 1986: 230, emphasis mine)

Normore thus concludes that a (materially) false idea is one that purports to represent, but actually fails to represent anything at all (i.e., it has no objective reality).

Normore's account of the representational breakdown of materially false ideas appears to escape the difficulties of Wilson's later reading. First, if a materially false idea is one that fails to pick out any referent, then all such ideas fail representationally simply by virtue of failing to match up with *any* item in the universe of real things. This obviates the need to give an account (as one has to on Wilson's account) of how one is to determine the relationship between the failed idea and the one particular referent against which it is measured and found wanting.

Second, such a view of materially false ideas fits in with Descartes's assertion (examined earlier) in the Fourth Set of Replies that the 'idea of cold' that does not present cold as it is, is not really an idea *of* cold. On Normore's view, an idea that is materially false fails to refer to any thing, and is not an idea *of* any thing at all. Thus, 'the idea of cold' that fails to match up with real cold (or any other item in the universe of real things) would not be an idea *of* cold (or of anything else).

While it may escape the problems of Wilson's later reading, Normore's account of the representational breakdown in materially false ideas faces difficulties of its own. Normore sees a very tight connection between objective reality and truth. He maintains that a (materially) false idea is one that has 'zero' objective reality (Normore 1986: 230). A little later, he also argues that one 'needs to have grounds for thinking an idea true to be justified in thinking it has objective reality' (ibid.) – that is, essentially, an idea must be (materially) true in order for it to have objective reality. For Normore, a (materially) false idea is one that lacks objective reality, while a (materially) true one is one that has objective reality.

Though this tight connection between material falsity and lack of objective reality seems justified if one looks at the Third Meditation, it might not be compatible with later portions of the *Meditations*. For instance, consider Descartes's proof of the external world in the Sixth Meditation. He points out in the proof that there must be some 'active faculty' producing the 'ideas of sensible objects' that are received by his passive faculty of sense-perception. This faculty is not in him, since the ideas are produced 'without his cooperation and often against his will' (AT 7: 79, CSM 2: 55). He then concludes:

> So the only alternative is that it is in another substance distinct from me – a substance that contains either formally or eminently all the reality that exists objectively in the ideas produced by this faculty. This substance is either a body, that is, a corporeal nature, in which case it will formally contain everything which is to be found objectively in the ideas, or else it is God, or some creature more noble than a body, in which case it will contain eminently whatever is to be found in the ideas.
>
> (AT 7: 79, CSM 2: 55)

But – he goes on to add –

> since God is not a deceiver, it is quite clear that he does not transmit the ideas to me either directly from himself, or indirectly, via some creature who contains the objective reality of the ideas not formally but eminently. For God has given

> me no . . . faculty for recognizing any such source for these ideas; on the contrary, he has given me a great inclination to believe that they are produced by corporeal things. So I do not see how God could be understood as anything but a deceiver if the ideas were transmitted from a source other than corporeal things. It follows that corporeal things exist.
>
> (AT 7: 79–80, CSM 2: 55)*

A discussion of the argumentative structure and precise claims of this proof is found in Chapter 4. In the meantime, note that this passage provides some food for thought for anyone who sees Descartes as maintaining a tight connection between material falsity and lack of objective reality.

As Normore points out, the causal principle in the Third Meditation requires that the objective reality in an idea cannot be more than the formal reality in the (total and efficient) cause of that idea. However, this principle also allows that the objective reality in an idea could be *less* than that of its cause. In this case, the cause of the idea would contain eminently the objective reality in the idea.

In the proof above, Descartes considers the hypothesis that the cause of his 'ideas of sensible objects' might contain eminently the objective reality in his ideas (for instance, that God or a non-material substance might have caused the ideas). Such ideas would (Descartes accepts) have objective reality. Nevertheless, it appears that Descartes would still think that the ideas are materially false if they are eminently caused by God. This is because the ideas are as-if images of 'sensible objects' – that is, they purport to be images of extended things. Thus, if they are directly caused by God, they would be materially false ideas. (From this, Descartes concludes that as God is not a deceiver, these ideas must truly have been caused by an actual extended world.)

What this passage suggests, then, is that (by the Sixth Meditation) an idea might contain or have objective reality, and yet still be materially false – if the *cause* of the objective reality is not as the idea purports it to be. Thus, *pace* Normore, materially false ideas are not confined to those that lack objective reality; nor does an idea have to be (materially) true in order to have objective reality.

There is a possible rejoinder to this objection. In the passage above, Descartes does not *explicitly* claim that the ideas of sensible objects would be materially false if it turns out that they are eminently caused by God or some 'higher' being. Rather, what he states is that God would be a deceiver if God gave him a 'great propensity' to believe that the cause of the ideas is an extended world, while directly causing these ideas, or having them caused by some higher being. This leaves the passage open to an alternative reading. On this reading, any linkage between a particular idea and its existing cause is effected by the judgement. The judgement that the ideas of sensible objects are caused by extended things would certainly be *formally false* if it turned out that these ideas were not caused by an existing extended world. Nevertheless, these ideas would still be *materially true* despite such a formally false judgement. These ideas are materially true insofar as they have objective reality. Whether the idea corresponds to any existing object is irrelevant to determining its material truth/falsehood, since such correspondence (or lack thereof) is the concern of the faculty of judgement.

This alternative reading has the benefit of preserving Normore's tight connection between truth and objective reality. However, it assumes that Descartes accepts that the link between an idea and an existing object can only be effected through an act of judgement. Chapter 3 will show that Descartes does not hold this position.

The accounts of materially false ideas by Normore and Wilson share this feature: both assume that such ideas have a fairly determinate representational content. For instance, suppose the idea of cold is materially false. Both would accept that a necessary condition for such material falsity is that the idea represents cold *as being a certain way* – say, as being a positive thing. Wilson would then say the idea is materially false insofar as it (re)presents cold as a positive thing, but refers to a privation; Normore insofar as it represents cold as a positive thing, but completely fails to refer. In both cases, the materially false idea involves a representing *as*; the idea represents cold as being such-and-such. We now examine a view that takes a different tack on materially false ideas. On this view, such ideas are precisely those that do *not* have determinate representational content.

Wells on material falsity and the late Scholastic influence

In an influential and carefully argued paper, Norman Wells showed that an understanding of the views of Descartes's late Scholastic predecessors, in particular Francisco Suárez (1548–1617), are indispensable for a correct interpretation of his account of materially false ideas (Wells 1984). To understand Descartes's account of materially false ideas, Wells argues, one must make a distinction between the truth and falsity of objects, and the material falsity of ideas.

According to the late Scholastic tradition embodied by Suárez, when one has a simple apprehension (*simplex apprehensio*), one cannot make a mistake about the object being apprehended. As Wells puts it:

> Simple apprehension can have no proper difformity with the thing which is its object . . . Either something is represented by such a simple apprehensive activity or it is not. If it is not represented, then it is not its object, and such representative activity cannot be false . . . If something is represented by that activity, then there can only be conformity between them since there can only be agreement between a *repraesentans* and its *repraesentatum*.
>
> (Wells 1984: 30)

Thus, whatever is represented by a *simplex apprehensio* must be represented truly. On the classical conception of an idea as essentially a *simplex apprehensio*, one would have to accept that the object of an idea must always be truly represented by that idea. Wells wants to argue that a materially false idea is one that deviates from an idea classically conceived as *simplex apprehensio*.

To understand Descartes's position on material falsity, however, we also need to understand Descartes's position on the truth and falsity of the *objects* of ideas. Descartes, following late Scholastic tradition, thinks that the *objects* of ideas may themselves be true or false. Such objects are true when they possess either intramental

reality (examples include triangles and other mathematical figures, whose natures are immutable and determinate) or extramental reality (such as God or a particular horse). The objects are false when they do not possess such reality. Again, if one sees the idea as a *simplex apprehensio*, then whether the idea has a true or false object, the idea cannot represent this object falsely. As a *simplex apprehensio*, the idea truly represents a true object as true, and a false object as false.

Wells argues that Descartes followed the late Scholastic tradition, insofar as he accepts that an idea cannot falsely represent (that is, misrepresent) its object. But if this is the case, then in what sense does Descartes take an idea to be materially false? Wells suggests that a materially false idea is seen by Descartes as one whose content is so confused and obscure that *one does not know whether it represents to the mind a true object or a false one*. In TMD, Descartes describes the ideas of heat and cold as so unclear and indistinct that he does not know whether 'cold is merely the privation of heat, or vice versa, or whether both of them are real qualities, or neither is'. (AT 7: 44, CSM 2: 30) Thus, Wells suggests, Descartes sees a materially false idea as one whose content is representationally obscure, such that one does not know whether it represents to the mind a thing or a non-thing. He writes:

> In such a cognitive situation, our judgements are at risk because, in the presence of a flawed representation, we are in the presence of *materia errandi*.
>
> (Wells 1984: 37)

Wells's reading of materially false ideas has the advantage that it seems to fit in nicely with the Fourth Set of Replies, where Descartes writes of a materially false idea thus:

> [O]wing to the fact that it is obscure and confused, I am unable to judge whether or not what it represents to me is something positive that exists outside of my sensation. And hence I may be led to judge that it is something positive though in fact it may merely be a privation. . . .
>
> (AT 7: 234, CSM 2: 164)*

This supports Wells's reading that materially false ideas are simply those that are confused and obscure, and hence representationally indeterminate, so that they put the judgement at risk of making a mistake.

However, Wells's interpretation requires a liberal reading of the Third Meditation. Consider again the relevant passage in TMD (in which individual segments have been numbered to facilitate discussion):

> For although, as I have noted before, falsity in the strict sense, or formal falsity, can only occur in the case of judgements, (1) there is another kind of falsity, material falsity, which occurs in ideas when they represent no things as things. For example, (2) the ideas that I have of heat and cold contain so little clarity and distinctness that they do not enable me to tell whether cold is merely the privation of heat or vice versa, or whether both of them are real qualities, or

> neither is. And (3) since *there are no ideas which are not as-if of things*, if it is true that cold is nothing but the privation of heat, the idea which represents it to me as something real and positive deserves to be called false, and the same goes for other ideas of this kind.
>
> (AT 7: 43–44, CSM 2: 30, emphasis mine)*

To begin with, Descartes specifically mentions in (1) that material falsity 'occurs in ideas when they represent no things as things'. This suggests that materially false ideas do have a specific representational content, that they represent no things as things. So such ideas are materially false because they represent falsely, not because one does not know what they represent to the mind.

Again, it is not clear that the passage Wells adduces to support his view does do so. When Descartes talks in (2) about the ideas of heat and cold as 'so little clear and distinct' that he does not know what they represent, it is not evident that he thinks that they are materially false *solely* in virtue of this feature. Rather, looked at within its proper context, Descartes seems to be saying that a lack of clarity and distinctness is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for an idea to be materially false. When an idea is confused and obscure, one is uncertain whether it *really* represents a thing or not. So, as Descartes explains in (3), since all ideas are 'as-if [images] of things' (that is, purport to represent things), an idea that purports to represent a thing when it really doesn't is materially false. Once again, the most natural reading here is to see Descartes as claiming that a materially false idea is one that represents falsely, not one that is so obscure that one does not know what it represents.

Wells counters the reading suggested above as follows. He agrees that there is an inevitable tendency to interpret a materially false idea as 'one which misrepresents a *non res* as a *res*, . . . indicating a *res* instead of or in place of a *non-res*' (Wells 1984: 38). He thinks this tendency results from a misunderstanding of Descartes's assertion at the beginning of (3) that 'there are no ideas which are not as-if of things' (a proposition hereafter referred to as S_1).

According to Wells, Descartes does *not* mean by S_1 that all ideas are 'as-if of positive or real things' (and hence that ideas are materially false when they don't actually represent such things). Rather, in accordance with Suárez and other Scholastics, he is simply asserting there that all ideas have some object (whether true or false): all ideas must be as-if of things in the sense that they portray some thing (positive or privative). As he puts it:

> Descartes' reader must recognize that when this text [the proposition S_1] boldly insists that *nullae ideae nisi tanquam rerum esse possunt*, Descartes is clearly embracing the classical teaching on simple apprehension as unerringly revealing the truth and falsity of objects. The *res repraesentata* may, indeed, be a positive *res* but as Suárez noted, it may not.
>
> (Wells 1984: 38–9)

One may have some doubts on Wells's argument here against the suggested reading. To begin with, this reading has more textual foundation than Wells accords it. It is

based not just on the assertion that 'there are no ideas which are not as-if of things', but on Descartes's specific assertion in (1) that material falsity occurs when 'ideas represent no things as things'.

Moreover, suppose one grants Wells's reading of S_1. It now becomes difficult to relate this first part of (3) to the rest of (3). (3) reads as follows:

> [S]ince *there are no ideas which are not as-if of things*, if it is true that cold is nothing but the privation of heat, the idea which represents it to me as something real and positive deserves to be called false, and the same goes for other ideas of this kind.

How is the assertion that all ideas must have *some* object (whether positive or privative) relevant to Descartes's subsequent point that the idea of cold as real and positive must count as false if cold is actually a privation? It is difficult to make sense of (3) on Wells's reading. On the other hand, if we read S_1 more conventionally as stating that all ideas are as-if of positive or real things, the passage comes out nicely as making the following claim:

> All ideas are as-if of real or positive things, so if cold is really a privation, the idea of cold (as real or positive) would be false.

Again, Wells's own view is that a materially false idea is one that is so obscure that one does not know what it represents to the mind. Now, even if one grants Wells's reading of S_1 or the first part of (3), this does not in fact save Wells's overall interpretation. This is because the rest of (3) clearly indicates that an idea is materially false not because it is representationally obscure, but because its representational content is mistaken: the idea of cold represents cold as real and positive to the mind, so if actual cold is a privation, that idea must be (materially) false.

Wells's account of materially false ideas accords due importance to the intellectual traditions that could have influenced Descartes. However, it is not quite consonant with Descartes's text in TMD. Wells argues that Descartes, influenced by Suárez, maintains that an idea must always truly represent its object. Yet the most natural reading of TMD is the one that sees Descartes as holding that a materially false idea is one that somehow *falsely* represents. The Cartesian idea thus differs from the Suárezian *simplex apprehensio* in that it can sometimes exhibit 'difformity' with what it purports to represent.

Bolton on the confused and obscure ideas of sense

Of the four commentators examined, Martha Bolton most directly expresses an attempt to deal with the apparent differences in the passages from the Third Meditation and the Fourth Set of Replies being considered here (Bolton 1986: 389–403). Bolton begins by arguing that Descartes uses the term '[materially] false idea' in both a narrow and a broad sense. In the Third Meditation, Descartes describes a false idea as one that represents nonentity 'as something positive'. This is

the narrow, strict sense of 'false idea'. But Descartes puts the term to a broader use in the Fourth Set of Replies:

> It is significant, however, that in the Replies he treats ideas that represent nothing as one class of false ideas. There he describes false ideas more broadly as all ideas that 'provide material for error' . . . On this broader view, all confused and obscure ideas are false . . .
>
> (Bolton 1986: 392)

Bolton sees the relationship between the strict sense of 'false idea' used in the Third Meditation and the broad sense in the Fourth Set of Replies as follows:

> It . . . seems safe to say that an idea that represents nothing as if it were something is an example of a larger class of confused and obscure ideas that represents things as if they were something they are not.
>
> (ibid.)

That is, false ideas in their Third Meditation sense are a subclass of false ideas used in the sense of the Fourth Set of Replies. Bolton mentions that she will continue to use the term 'false idea' in its strict sense (to mean those that represent nonentity as positive), reserving the term 'confused and obscure idea' for ideas that are false in the broader sense (that is, those that represent things as if they were something they are not).

According to Bolton, it is important for us to recognize that Descartes did not intend a false idea to be understood as an idea that 'exhibits to mind something which is not the object of the idea' (Bolton 1986: 393). Arnauld assumed that this was what Descartes took a false idea to be, and argued that it is a disastrous line to take. To avoid the traps to Descartes's account of material falsity mentioned by Arnauld, Bolton argues that the false ideas in the Third Meditation are so, not because they exhibit reality and represent nonentity (for this would involve that such ideas exhibit something other than their object), but because they *seem* to exhibit something positive, but actually exhibit nonentity. Correspondingly, a confused and obscure idea is one that 'seems to exhibit its object in a way it does not actually exhibit it' (Bolton 1986: 395).

Bolton fleshes out what she means by this as follows. She notes that the distinction between 'what an idea seems to represent, and what it actually does' must be drawn carefully. One should not think that what a false idea exhibits is a sort of 'second phantom object of thought':

> There is some temptation to treat the apparent quality [that the idea seems to exhibit] as an auxiliary object accompanying and obscuring the actual (non-) object of the idea. To do so is folly. If the phantom 'object' is the real quality cold,[2] there is such a (possible) quality and the idea of cold is not false. If the auxiliary object is not something real, then it is not something different from the actual object, after all.
>
> (ibid.)

To avoid this problem, Bolton suggests that a false idea (or any confused, obscure idea) represents its object 'by means not evident from the idea itself'. That is, while such an idea 'truly represents whatever it represents', the 'scope for confusion and falsehood lies in its *basis* of representation':

> To someone who makes a false assumption about its representational device, a false idea seems to represent something, although it really represents nothing; more generally, to such a person, a confused and obscure idea seems to represent something it does not. Such an idea portrays its object by obscure means. A person who understands the means correctly apprehends the idea's object; one who misunderstands them is likely to make errors about its object, but still has an idea which correctly exhibits it.
>
> (ibid.)

In sum, then, all ideas – even false or confused ones – exhibit their object: a false idea actually exhibits nonentity, and more generally, a confused and obscure idea of X actually exhibits X. But falsehood and confusion in an idea come about because one makes a mistake about the means or device by which an idea portrays its object, leading to errors about the exhibited object.

Bolton argues that one can, on her interpretation, reconcile Descartes's pronouncements on material falsity in both the Third Meditation and the Fourth Set of Replies. In the Fourth Set of Replies, Descartes calls the idea of cold materially false because

> since it is obscure and confused, I cannot decide whether it displays something outside my sensation or not.
>
> (AT 7: 234, quoted by Bolton from the Haldane and Ross translation)

Bolton argues that this account is quite consistent with Descartes's view in the Third Meditation that a materially false idea is what represents nonentity as something positive: as she argues, it is because the idea is so 'obscure and confused' that it provides opportunity for 'judging cold to be positive when perhaps it is not'. Bolton sums up the link between the two accounts as follows:

> a false idea taken alone does not seem to represent something positive; taken alone its representational content is merely obscure. But when the idea is viewed in the context of false assumptions about its manner of representation, it seems to exhibit what it does not.
>
> (Bolton 1986: 396)

Bolton ultimately argues that, though the ideas of felt heat and cold turn out to be confused and obscure, they are not materially false in the narrow sense. Narrowly false ideas are those that seem to exhibit reality but actually exhibit nonentity, whereas the ideas of heat and cold turn out to exhibit something real. In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes argues that he has no grounds for thinking that the ideas of felt heat and

cold resemble (that is, mirror) the bodies they exhibit. However, the variations in these ideas do (to a large extent) correspond to variations in the bodies they exhibit. Thus, the ideas of felt heat and cold can be seen to represent real (and existing) objects, once we understand what the 'unit of representation' in question is:

> [I]t is not isolated ideas of colour and heat [that represent], but a complex pattern in which these ideas are elements . . . The problem is that we take one or two ideas to exhibit actual things, when in fact it is a larger segment of experience that (correctly) represents them.
>
> (Bolton 1986: 400)

Thus, Bolton's conclusion is that the (pre-meditative) ideas of felt heat and cold may have represented obscurely, for one mistook the representational device by which these ideas represented. (One assumed that single ideas of heat and cold represented actual things, whereas it is a larger segment of experience that exhibits these ideas.) However, insofar as these ideas of heat and cold turn out all along to have in some way exhibited something real, Bolton argues that they are not false.

Bolton offers a subtle and thoughtful reading of the materially false ideas of sense. She is clearly cognizant of the shift between the accounts of (material) falsity in the Third Meditation and Fourth Set of Replies, and her reading makes an attempt to relate the two accounts to each other. However, there may be difficulties attached to her reading.

One such difficulty concerns the nature of confusion and obscurity in an idea. Bolton begins by stating that Descartes has two accounts going of the nature of the representational breakdown in materially false ideas. On the first, strict account, an idea is materially false only if it represents nonentity as positive. But in the broader account of the Fourth Set of Replies, she maintains, Descartes sees 'all confused and obscure ideas [as] false' (Bolton 1986: 392). Discussing confusion and obscurity in this context, Bolton characterizes a confused and obscure idea as one that 'represent(s) things as if they were something they are not' (ibid.) and, a little later, as one that 'seems to exhibit its object in a way it does not actually exhibit it' (395), and again, as one that 'seems to represent something it does not' (ibid.). On this account, it seems clear that the Descartes of the Fourth Set of Replies would see a confused and obscure idea as one that somehow wrongly *represents as* (for instance, one which *seems to* represent something it does not). As Bolton describes it here, confused and obscure ideas are those that have a determinate (though mistaken) representational content.

However, Bolton also has another account of confusion and obscurity going. Referring to Descartes's assertion in the Fourth Set of Replies that the idea of cold is materially false because 'since it is obscure and confused, I cannot decide whether it displays something outside my sensation or not', she maintains that this is not a 'significant shift' from his Third Meditation stance. In her attempt to reconcile the Third Meditation with this passage, she comes up with a characterization of confusion and obscurity in an idea which is at odds with the one she had earlier attributed to Descartes:

> [A] false idea taken alone does not seem to represent something positive; *taken alone, its representational content is merely obscure*.
>
> (Bolton 1986: 396, emphasis mine)

Here, it seems that an idea is (confused and) obscure when its representational content is indeterminate – when it does not clearly *represent as*. When the representational content of an idea is indeterminate, this gives us the chance to 'view it in the context of false assumptions about its manner of representation'.

To make coherent sense of Descartes's various pronouncements on material falsity, Bolton has cashed out confusion and obscurity in an idea in two ways. On the one hand, an idea is confused and obscure insofar as its representational content is obscure, giving one the opportunity to make a mistake about its manner of representation (whether or not one makes use of this opportunity, the idea is still confused and obscure). On the other, Bolton often defines a confused and obscure idea as one that determinately (and wrongly) represents as, one that 'seems to represent something it does not'. Confusion and obscurity thus perform double duty in Bolton's account, and it is not clear if its two roles are quite compatible.

Another drawback to Bolton's view is that she ends up attributing to Descartes an ultimately inconsistent view concerning falsity (and correspondingly, truth). Bolton sees Descartes as holding on to two different versions of what a false idea consists in: on the one hand, an idea is false only if it represents nonentity as positive; on the other, it is false if it in any way seems to exhibit its object in a way it actually does not. This leads to the rather odd result that, for Descartes, an idea can be true in one sense and yet false in the other. (For instance, the pre-meditative idea of cold is true in the narrow sense, and false in the broad one.)

Given this dual account of falsity (and truth), it seems to me that Bolton does not, strictly speaking, manage to reconcile the accounts of material falsity in the Third Meditation and the Fourth Set of Replies. Rather, her account of false ideas seems merely to *acknowledge* that there is a difference between the two accounts, without offering an explanation of *why* they vary. It thus remains a puzzle as to why Descartes should have changed to a broader version of falsity than the one in the *Meditations* in his reply to Arnauld.

Conclusion

This chapter has offered a conspectus of 'static' readings. The accounts of Wilson, Normore, Wells and Bolton on the nature of material falsity were located relative to each other, as were their underlying notions of what Cartesian representation involves. In the next chapter, I use the 'map' created in this chapter to locate a 'dynamic' reading of Cartesian material falsity and Cartesian representation.

3 A 'Dynamic' Interpretation of Materially False Ideas

Introduction

A 'dynamic' interpretation of materially false ideas is one maintaining that the criteria that determine an idea as materially false change in the course of the *Meditations*, according to the changes in Descartes's epistemic status. In this chapter, I offer a dynamic interpretation of materially false ideas. The chapter is divided broadly into three parts. The first part examines Suárez's views on formal and material falsity, and shows how Descartes's views on these two notions are closely based on Suárez's. Certain key features of the Cartesian materially false idea are identified on the basis of this comparison. In the second and most substantial portion, Descartes's own notion of material falsity is explored in detail. I show that the sorts of representational failure that make an idea materially false will change as Descartes's epistemic perspective changes. In the final part, this reading of Cartesian material falsity will be defended against alternative readings.

Suárez and Descartes on formal and material falsity

Descartes makes clear in the Third Meditation that formal falsity can only be ascribed to judgements, whereas material falsity is exclusively to be ascribed to ideas. Any account that aims to understand Cartesian falsehood (and truth) by reference to material falsity in ideas has to show how such material falsity relates to *genuine* falsity (that is, formal falsity in judgements). Thus, this chapter will not only provide an account of Cartesian material falsity in ideas but a corresponding account of Cartesian formal falsity in judgements, and of the relationship between the two.

Suárez's influence on Descartes has been extensively documented and discussed.[1] In the Fourth Set of Replies, Descartes makes a very rare direct reference to the work of his late-Scholastic predecessors by announcing firmly and confidently that his usage of 'materially' (false) is identical to that of Suárez in DM 9, 2: 4. An examination of DM 9, 2: 4 reveals that it makes evident not just Suárez's views on material falsity, but also his views on formal falsity in judgements. In this first part of the chapter, I examine Descartes's views on formal and material falsity by reference to the accounts of formal and material falsity in DM 9, 2: 4. I look first at Suárez's and Descartes's views on formal falsity, before going on to their views on material falsity.

Suárez and Descartes on formal falsity

The standard Scholastic account of the intellect sees the intellect as performing three kinds of operations. The first operation is simple apprehension, the second is judgement, and the third, reasoning from premises to conclusions. It is the first two operations that are of concern here. Menn provides this useful characterization of the standard Scholastic view concerning these operations:

> The first operation merely apprehends a concept or 'forms the quiddity' of some thing, without asserting or denying any predicate of the thing conceived; simple apprehension therefore cannot be called true or false, except in an improper sense. Truth and falsehood properly reside only in the second operation of judgement or (as it is frequently called) 'the intellect composing and dividing,' i.e. conjoining and disjoining a subject and a predicate: the judgement is true if the things conjoined by the intellect are conjoined in reality (or if things disjoined by the intellect are disjoined in reality), false if the things conjoined by the intellect are disjoined in reality (or if things disjoined are conjoined).
>
> (Menn 1998: 310)

On the standard Scholastic account, the first operation – the simple apprehension of a concept – cannot properly be called true or false, for in such apprehensions there is no affirmation or denial of a particular predicate to the thing conceived. Proper truth and falsity belong to the second operation of judgement, which involves conjoining and disjoining by the intellect. During judgement, a particular predicate may be affirmed to belong to a subject (when the intellect conjoins a predicate with a subject), or the predicate may be denied as belonging to a subject (when the intellect disjoins a predicate from a subject). The judgement is true or false according to whether what is being affirmed or denied in the intellect actually obtains in reality.

Given that this is the standard Scholastic account, Suárez's own stand departs in significant ways from it. To begin with, consider the opening passage from DM 9, 2: 4:

> Composition and division can be found either in *the apprehension of a concept alone, prior to any judgement*, or in a conception that involves a simultaneous judgement . . . [C]omplex truth is properly found in the composition involving judgement, and the same must therefore be said of falsity.
>
> (Ariew *et al.* 1998: 35, emphasis mine)*

The standard Scholastic account accepts that conjoining and disjoining occurs specifically during judgement. Suárez, however, departs from this position. He maintains that the conjoining/disjoining of a predicate to a given subject may take place in an apprehension *that does not include judgement*. For Suárez, apprehension is not limited to the simple apprehension of concepts; one may also apprehend conjunctions and disjunctions. In DM 8, 4: 5, he argues that one can apprehend the conjunction 'Stars are born' (*Astra sunt paria*) while suspending one's judgement about whether it is

true or false. In such cases, Suárez holds, the conjunction (or disjunction) is neither formally true nor false. As he points out in the opening passage of DM 9, 2: 4, 'complex truth' (by which he means truth/falsity with respect to conjunctions and disjunctions as opposed to simple apprehensions) is 'properly found' in the composition [or division] that 'involves a simultaneous judgement', and the same goes for complex falsity.

If conjunction and disjunction can occur in apprehensions not involving judgement, what then distinguishes judgement as an operation? For Suárez, the distinguishing feature of judgement is that it involves *affirmation or denial*. For Suárez, affirmation and denial are distinct operations from conjoining and disjoining: to affirm is to claim that an apprehended conjunction (or disjunction) does actually obtain in fact. To deny is to claim that a conjunction (or disjunction) does not so obtain. The operation of judgement involves either the affirmation or denial that a particular conjunction/disjunction is true (that is, descriptive of what is the case).

In short, the standard Scholastic account may see a less than sharp demarcation between intellectual composition and division, on the one hand, and affirmation and denial, on the other, in the sense that both are held to take place – and to take place specifically – in judgements. In contrast, Suárez holds that it is *only* affirmation or denial that occurs specifically in judgement, and hence is the defining characteristic of a judgement. Conjoining and disjoining need not involve the operation of judgement. But while he departs from the standard Scholastic position in this respect, Suárez follows the standard Scholastic line in holding that it is judgements (which are for him affirmations and denials) that are properly true or false.

Suárez's subsequent account of material falsity in apprehensions in DM 9, 2: 4 makes it evident that he held these views concerning judgements:

> [I]t can be admitted that in [an] apprehension, although there is something as it were materially false, it is not something false in the judgement that affirms or puts something forward, but merely in the sign, which signifies something false in its own right. Thus, there is [material] falsity in the proposition 'There is no God', either written down or materially put forward by him who reports 'The fool hath said in his heart "There is no God"'.
>
> (Ariew *et al.* 1998: 36)

Suárez maintains here that while there may be material falsity in an apprehension, this differs from the (actual) falsity that occurs 'in the judgement that affirms or puts something forward'. Clearly, then, Suárez accepts the two following claims. First, a judgement 'puts something forward' (that is, affirms or denies it to be true or false). Second, actual truth and falsity occurs in judgements, not apprehensions.

That judgements are characterized by their 'putting something forward' is further confirmed by the subsequent examples Suárez uses to illustrate material falsity. A written statement that 'There is no God' is not in itself an *affirmation* (or denial, for that matter) by someone that there is no God. Similarly, the person who reports the Biblical claim that the fool thinks there is no God is merely quoting

from the Bible – she is not thereby affirming (or denying) that there really is no God. In neither of these cases is there a *judgement* – a 'putting forward' of a claim – that there is no God. Consequently, there is no formal (or proper) falsity involved in either. However, there is (for Suárez) *material* falsity in the statement written down or reported upon – this statement 'There is no God' 'signifies something false in its own right', and if someone *were* to affirm that statement (or deny its negation), she would have made a genuinely false judgement.

Given Descartes's appeal to DM 9, 2: 4 in the Fourth Set of Replies, he clearly thought that Suárez's account of material falsity – and correspondingly of formal falsity – closely approximated his own. (Indeed, given Suárez's well-documented influence on Descartes's views, it is plausible to claim that Descartes *derived* his account of formal and material falsity from that of Suárez.) This being so, the Suárezian notion of formal falsity can be applied to an understanding of Descartes's notion of the same.

As mentioned, Descartes claims in the Third Meditation that material falsity belongs to ideas, whereas formal falsity belongs to judgements. In the latter claim, at least, he clearly follows Suárez and other Scholastics. Bearing in mind his claims in respect of DM 9, 2: 4 in the Fourth Set of Replies, we can also conclude that Descartes follows Suárez in holding that judgements are affirmations or denials. Indeed, this is what Descartes maintains in the Fourth Meditation. With respect to perceptions of the intellect that are not clear and distinct, he writes:

> If . . . I simply refrain from making a judgement (in such cases), then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. But if in such cases I either affirm or deny, then I am not using my free will correctly.
>
> (AT 7: 59, CSM 2: 41)

It is clear from this passage (and elsewhere)[2] that Descartes takes 'making a judgement' to be the act of affirmation or denial. Such affirmations and denials would be false in cases where what is affirmed (or denied) does not correspond to what obtains. Thus, one avoids error by ensuring that one affirms or denies only when one is wholly certain that what is being affirmed or denied actually does or does not obtain (that is, when what one perceives is clear and distinct).

Material falsity in Suárez and Descartes

We now pass on to how Suárez and Descartes conceive of material falsity. As both agree that formal falsity belongs to judgements (in other words, affirmations and denials), one might plausibly suggest that material falsity obtains in Cartesian ideas in a manner analogous to the manner in which Suárez claims material falsity to obtain in apprehensions in DM 9, 2: 4.

In DM 9, 2: 4, Suárez writes that apprehensions involving conjunctions and disjunctions may be materially false insofar as they signify 'something false in its own right'. He then illustrates such falsity in apprehensions by saying that it is akin to the falsity in the claim 'There is no God' when this statement is written down or

reported upon. A *prima facie* difficulty with attempting to understand material falsity in the Cartesian idea by reference to material falsity in the Suárezian apprehension is this: Suárez's materially false apprehension, insofar as it pertains to conjunctions and disjunctions, involves apprehension of propositions (or statements in propositional form). The examples that he brings up similarly involve a proposition ('There is no God'). But it will be argued that Cartesian ideas do not make such propositional claims. How then could Suárez's proposition-based material falsity be appealed to in order to understand material falsity in Cartesian ideas?

This question can be usefully connected to a criticism made by Wilson. She argues that Descartes, in maintaining that judgement involves the act of affirmation or denial towards an idea, fails to distinguish adequately between ideas, on the one hand, and propositions or propositional contents, on the other:

> [Descartes] . . . had said that ideas are like images of things, and as such neither [properly] true nor false. But *clearly, what we affirm or deny are not 'images of things', but propositions or propositional contents* . . . Descartes does not distinguish carefully enough the various *sorts* of mental representation (e.g., concepts and propositions).
>
> (Wilson 1978: 141, my emphasis)

Wilson points out that judgements are affirmations or denial towards ideas, which are as-if images of things. But how can we affirm or deny a non-propositional (as-if) image of a thing?

A remark that Descartes makes to Mersenne concerning some unknown correspondent provides illumination on this question:

> I must tell you that your friend has altogether missed my meaning when, in order to mark the distinction between the ideas in the imagination and those in the mind, he says that the former are expressed by terms, and the latter by propositions. It is not whether they are expressed by terms or by propositions which makes [ideas] belong to the mind or the imagination; *they can both be expressed in either way*.
>
> (AT 3: 695, CSMK: 186, emphasis mine)

Descartes states here that all ideas can be expressed using *either* terms or propositions. As mentioned earlier, an idea, insofar as it is an as-if image of a thing, has representational character or representational purport. Thus, my idea of God is a mental representation *of* God. We would presumably express this idea of God using a term when we denominate the idea as an idea of *God*. But note that this idea or mental representation of God must also represent (real or existing) God as *being a certain way* – for instance, it might represent God as omnipotent, as simple, and so on. The content of this mental representation of God could, again, be expressed using terms – for instance, when we think of *God-as-omnipotent* or *God-as-simple*. But the same content could also be expressed using propositions – for instance, when we think 'God is omnipotent' or 'God is simple'. When one expresses the idea of God

in this latter way, one is not thereby making a *truth*-claim that God is omnipotent or that God is simple. Rather, one is simply *outlining* or *describing* the content of one's idea of God in propositions. However, when one then goes on to *affirm* that (it is indeed true that) 'God is omnipotent' or 'God is simple' (or to deny it), one is putting forward a claim that is either formally true or false. (In what follows, I shall for the sake of brevity confine myself to cases involving the affirmation of Cartesian ideas, propositionally stated. However, my claims also apply to denials of such ideas.)

Descartes's claim to Mersenne shows that he is not subject to Wilson's criticism. For Descartes, the content of any idea (*qua* as-if image of a thing) is expressible in propositions. The thinker who makes a judgement can cogently affirm or deny the content of an idea, when that content is expressed in propositional terms.

That Cartesian ideas may be expressed propositionally enables one to apply the Suárezian account of material falsity to understanding the Cartesian account of the same. A Cartesian idea is materially false when its content is such that, when that content is expressed propositionally and then affirmed, this would result in a false judgement being made. It is thus analogous to the Suárezian materially false apprehended conjunction/disjunction in DM 9, 2: 4, which if affirmed would result in a false judgement.

Descartes claims that his notion of 'materially' (false) is 'identical' to that of Suárez's in DM 9, 2: 4. What are the significant features of the materially false apprehension in DM 9, 2: 4 (apart from its affirmation being a false judgement)?

First, note that the statement cited by Suárez in his examples to illustrate such falsity – 'There is no God' – is not obscure insofar as one knows *what* it is that the statement claims. That is to say, the content of the statement is specific and determinate. The conjunctions and disjunctions involved in Suárezian materially false apprehensions would be similarly specific and evident (for instance, 'God is not omnipotent' or 'horses are rational').

Second, the statement 'There is no God' is (at least to the sixteenth-century Suárez) obviously *false*, in the sense that an affirmation of that statement is obviously a false judgement. This would also be true of conjunctions and disjunctions occurring in the materially false Suárezian apprehension. As Suárez puts it, such apprehensions 'signify something false in [their] own right' (which if affirmed result in false judgements).

Since Descartes maintains that he uses the term 'materially' (false) in a way identical to that of Suárez's in DM 9, 2: 4, we can infer that the Cartesian materially false idea is also one whose content is determinate and specific, and also that it is 'false' insofar as an affirmation of the idea would result in a false judgement. Thus, for example, consider the idea of cold-as-positive in TMD. The content of this idea is quite specific and could be expressed propositionally as 'Cold is positive'. If indeed actual cold is a privation or absence, then this idea of cold would be materially false insofar as an affirmation of the idea (expressed propositionally) would result in a false judgement.

Commentators have been divided over whether Cartesian ideas can be materially *true*. The reading outlined above would imply that there *are* materially true ideas.[3] For instance, suppose it were really the case that cold is positive. In that case, it is plausible to claim that the idea of cold-as-positive is materially true, insofar as an

affirmation of the idea (when expressed propositionally) would result in a true judgement. Such a position is consistent with Suárez's position, in particular with Disputation 8 (which is concerned with truth). Suárez emphasizes in Disputation 8 that there is no proper truth and falsehood in apprehensions of conjunctions and disjunctions 'until judgement takes place'. But if one takes a materially true apprehension to be one that 'signifies truly in its own right', so that its affirmation would be a true judgement, then Suárez would accept there are such apprehensions.

At this point, the following objection may be made. Reading Cartesian material falsity in the light of DM 9, 2: 4 provides an account of material falsity consonant with that in the Third Meditation. In particular, TMD portrays materially false ideas as those which 'represent no things *as things*' (emphasis mine), and thus, as discussed in Chapter 2, as having a determinate representational content. But it might be objected that it does not adequately reflect the account in the Fourth Set of Replies, where a materially false idea is precisely one that is representationally obscure, in the sense that one does not know how or what it represents. In my discussion of the Fourth Set of Replies later in this chapter, I argue that the reading of Cartesian material falsity derived from DM 9, 2: 4 is in fact supported by the Fourth Set of Replies. This should not be surprising, since it is there that Descartes explicitly refers his readers to DM 9, 2: 4 for further clarification of his own position.

In short, Descartes does model his account of material falsity in ideas after Suárez's account of material falsity in apprehensions in DM 9, 2: 4. But to understand precisely how Descartes modelled his account on the latter, it must be recognized that Descartes did not – or did not always – see his idea as comparable to the Suárezian *simplex apprehensio*. The Cartesian idea, at least in this context, is rather to be compared with the Suárezian apprehension involving composition or division. (Recognizing this to be the point of comparison here enables one to understand how Descartes can claim in TMD that the materially false idea *falsely* represents – whereas the assumption that the Cartesian idea is solely to be compared with the *simplex apprehensio* cannot accommodate such a claim.) Descartes is able to effect cogently this comparison between his idea and Suárez's apprehended conjunction (or disjunction) because he accepts that ideas may be expressed using propositions.

At this point, one might object that the evidence I have cited to support the claim that Descartes held that ideas could be expressed propositionally is flimsy, based as it is on an (apparently) throwaway line in one letter. In response to this, note first that many commentators who work on Cartesian ideas in fact acknowledge as evident that Descartes thinks of ideas as propositional, or thinks that ideas have a propositional counterpart (see, for instance, Alanen 2003: 155 and Bolton 1986: 394). More importantly, given that DM 9, 2: 4 is concerned with the material falsity of apprehended conjunctions/disjunctions, any attempt to make sense of Descartes's appeal to DM 9, 2: 4 in the Fourth Replies must in itself presuppose that the Cartesian idea must have a propositional equivalent. Thus, Descartes's appeal to DM 9, 2: 4 *itself* constitutes strong evidence that we should assign his brief claim that ideas can be expressed as propositions its due weight.

We can see that a comparison of Descartes's notions of material and formal falsity with Suárez's makes evident certain fundamental features of Cartesian materially

false ideas, as well as their relation to formally false judgements. Insofar as Cartesian ideas are as-if images of things, they can be materially true or materially false. They are materially true insofar as they represent the thing in question to be as it is actually is. (For Descartes, as we shall see, this thing represented by the idea may either be an existing thing or a 'real' thing which has no concrete existence.) Conversely, they are materially false insofar as they fail in some way in performing this representing function. But there is no actual truth or falsehood in the idea itself (even when one expresses the idea's content propositionally). Actual truth or falsehood comes when one affirms that the thing as represented in the idea *actually is so* in reality/existence. A materially false idea provides 'material for error' insofar as its presence in the thinker tempts the thinker to affirm that what is represented in the idea is, when expressed propositionally, descriptive of the real/existing states of affairs. Thus, if cold is actually a privation, the idea of cold-as-positive provides 'material for error' insofar as its presence tempts one to affirm that cold is (really or existentially) positive and hence tempts one to make a false judgement.

For Descartes, then, a materially true idea is one that accurately represents a thing to be as it is in reality/existence, and a materially false idea one that (somehow) fails to do this. But this characterization of material falsity is not exactly precise: how does a materially false idea fail to represent? Does such an idea completely fail to refer (as Normore claims) or does it refer to some object but present it as different from the way it is (as Wilson claims in her 1990 chapter)? Moreover, under what conditions does the idea represent a real thing, and when does it represent an existing one?

The next two sections will be concerned with these questions. As I will argue, the types of objects that ideas represent differ in the discussions of material falsity in the Third Meditation and the Fourth Set of Replies, and this variance is the result of changes in Descartes's epistemic status between the Third Meditation and the end of the *Meditations*. The ways in which a materially false idea fails to represent then vary according to the object being represented.

As the basic distinction between Cartesian formal and material falsity is now sufficiently well established, I shall from now on describe ideas as simply 'true' or 'false' in reference to their material, not formal, truth or falsity.

Material falsity and the epistemic constraints of the Third Meditation

Descartes's account of material falsity is 'dynamic', or in other words, the criteria that determine an idea as materially false vary with the changes in epistemic perspective in the course of the *Meditations*. This section explores the epistemic constraints faced by Descartes in the Third Meditation, and shows how these dictate the account of material falsity found there.

Before I embark on the argument proper of this section, a brief remark needs to be made concerning the ideas mentioned in TMD. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Descartes in TMD divides his 'ideas of corporeal things' into two classes. The first includes ideas of what might be called primary qualities (such as size, shape and position), and the second of secondary qualities (such as heat and cold or colours).

There has been some discussion concerning the status of the idea of primary qualities mentioned in TMD.

It is generally accepted that there are, for Descartes, two kinds of ideas of primary qualities. First, there are the ideas of size, shape and so on 'considered generally or abstractly'. Such ideas are examined in the Fifth Meditation, and Descartes maintains that they are clear and distinct. There has been some contention among commentators as to whether such ideas belong to the intellect or to the imagination, or to a combination of the two (see, for instance, Wilson 1999a: 26–40; Gaukroger 1992: 91–114; Vinci 1998). Second, there are the 'sensory' or 'sense-perceived' ideas of particular sizes and shapes of specific corporeal bodies, discussed in the Sixth Meditation. Such ideas are for Descartes 'obscure and confused', insofar as the sizes and shapes presented in the ideas may not correspond to what exists in the corporeal world.

Descartes holds that there are obvious phenomenological differences between the first and second kinds of ideas. Those in the former category either do not involve images (if one holds they are ideas of the intellect *per se*) or involve images that one 'sees with [the] mind's eye' (if one holds they are ideas involving imagination: AT 7: 50, CSM 2: 72). In either case, they are to be contrasted with (ostensibly) sensory ideas, which represent 'sizes, shapes and motions' as 'things or modes of things, existing outside thought' (AT 8A: 35, CSM 1: 219). Such 'sensory' ideas would further differ from ideas of the imagination in being 'more lively and vivid' (AT 7: 75, CSM 2: 52) and in being involuntary (AT 7: 38, CSM 2: 26).

One question that has been debated is whether the ideas of size, shape and so on mentioned in TMD are 'sensory' ideas of primary qualities, or are the 'abstract' ideas of these qualities found in the intellect/imagination (see, for instance, Wilson 1978: 106–7; Wilson 1999a: 27) In Chapter 4 I will argue that the ideas of size, shape and so on mentioned in TMD are 'sensory' or 'sense-perceived'. This implies, of course, that Descartes accepts that there *are* ideas that are both (ostensibly) sensory, as well as clear and distinct. I'll argue later that Descartes in fact thinks that there *are* such ideas of size and shape, which are 'sensory' (that is, they are involuntary and present size and shape as 'modes of things existing outside thought'), but are also clear and distinct (insofar as the 'sensory' size and shape perceived is recognized to conform immutably to geometrical laws). Pending such argument, it is simply assumed now that the ideas of size and shape mentioned in TMD are 'sensory'. Correspondingly, the ideas of colours, cold and so on in TMD are also 'sensory' – that is, they are involuntary, and present these colours and temperature as modes of things existing outside thought. However, they differ from the ideas of size and shape in being, as Descartes points out, 'confused and obscure'. With this in mind, we now proceed to look at the epistemic context of TMD, in order to see how this constrains the account of material falsity found therein.

The epistemic context of the Third Meditation account of material falsity

The epistemic context of this first discussion of material falsity is governed by what had happened in the First and Second Meditations. In the First Meditation, Descartes

had, by dint of sceptical questioning, established that he had no grounds for believing in the existence of an external world (or even in such seemingly unquestionable truths as those of mathematics). In the Second Meditation, however, he ascertains that he exists (at least as a thinker), with a procession of thoughts passing through his mind. Nevertheless, by the end of that meditation, Descartes still finds himself operating under severe epistemic constraints, for he is still confined within the circle of his own thoughts. How is he to get out of his solipsistic bind? The goal of the Third Meditation is to see if he can make an inference from his thoughts to the existence of what lies beyond him *qua* thinker.

The first attempt at such an inference made by Descartes is both abortive and instructive. Descartes begins the Third Meditation by ordering and classifying his thoughts, noting the distinction (outlined in Chapter 1) between ideas in the strict sense, and thoughts that include an 'additional form' besides the idea. He then examines ideas, strictly taken, and here he comes upon an apparently promising route to what exists beyond him.

Descartes finds that some of his ideas (such as his idea of the sun he sees, or the fire he feels) are 'sensory' ideas that purport to 'come from things located outside me' (AT 7: 38, CSM 2: 26). The fact that some of his ideas purport to come from corporeal things located outside himself appears to offer Descartes a route beyond himself: if such ideas as that of the sun and the fire apparently come from things outside himself, might he not have grounds for thinking that an external (corporeal) world exists?

However, this route to what lies beyond himself ultimately fails, and this failure is important in making evident the epistemic context in which the Third Meditation account of materially false ideas occurs. What Descartes's failure shows is that that he has no grounds to think that an external world exists outside him at this point; and, as a result, a certain standard account of representation in ideas is inapplicable at this point.

In his quest to find out whether there exists an external world outside him, Descartes begins by asking:

> The chief question at this point concerns the ideas which I take to be derived from things existing outside me: what is my reason for thinking that they resemble these things?
>
> (AT 7: 38, CSM 2: 26)

He analyses his reasons for thinking this, and finds them wanting. First, he points out that he had a natural impulse to think this – but that such impulses might lead him astray (as they have when it comes to 'choosing the good': AT 7: 39, CSM 2: 27). Second, he had thought these ideas come from outside him because they do not depend on his will. But he concedes that they might well come from an unknown faculty within himself (AT 7: 39, CSM 2: 27).

Descartes thus finds that he has no means of re-establishing the existence of an external world. His 'sensory' ideas are as if from such a world, but they may come from himself. He has no grounds for thinking that these ideas actually derive from the cause they purport to come from. He then adds:

> finally, even if these ideas did come from things other than myself, it would not follow that they must resemble those things. Indeed I think I have often discovered a great disparity in many cases. E.g., there are two different ideas of the sun which I find within me. One of them, which is acquired as it were from the senses and which is a prime example of an idea which I reckon to come from an external source, makes the sun appear very small. The other idea is based on astronomical reasoning, that is, it is derived from certain notions which are innate in me (or else it is constructed by me in some other way), and this shows the sun to be several times larger than the earth. Obviously both these ideas cannot resemble the sun which exists outside me . . .
>
> (AT 7: 39, CSM 2: 27)

Here, Descartes points out that, even if these ideas come from the cause they purport to, there is no guarantee that they will accurately represent their cause. He has two ideas which are as if of an existing sun: one represents the sun as very small, the other as enormous. Even if these two ideas are ideas of an existing sun (that is, even if they are caused by such an existing sun), it does not follow that they must accurately represent this sun (indeed, they could not *both* accurately represent the sun).

Descartes then concludes:

> All these considerations are enough to establish that it is not reliable judgement but merely some blind impulse that has made me believe up till now that there exist things distinct from myself which immit into me [*immittant mihi*] ideas or images of themselves through the sense organs or in some other way.
>
> (AT 7: 40, CSM 2: 27)*

Descartes reiterates here his earlier conclusions. He had once assumed that there existed an external world whose contents 'immitted' into him ideas of themselves. That is, he had thought that there were external things that *caused* him to have these ideas. He had also assumed that these external things were *accurately* represented by the ideas themselves. But such assumptions are unjustified: there are no grounds at present for thinking these 'sensory' ideas are caused by things external to him – far less that they accurately represent these things.

Note that, in the light of Descartes's preceding discussion, a certain standard account of how ideas represent must be ruled out at this point. Assuming that there is a known external world whose contents cause the thinker to have certain ideas, these ideas could plausibly be said to represent their cause – that is, the external thing which 'immits' its idea into the thinker (for example, my idea of the sun could plausibly be said to represent the existing sun which causes me to have this idea). On this account of representation, an idea would represent truly only if:

1 the idea comes from the cause from which it purports to come;
2 the idea accurately represents that cause.[4]

If it fails to meet (1) or (2), the idea would be false. (For instance, my idea of the sun would represent truly only if the idea is caused by the sun itself, and only if it accurately represents that sun. It would be false otherwise.)

I shall call this account, in which an idea is seen as representing its cause, the Accurate Causal Portrayal account of representation (hereafter ACP). In ACP, an idea represents truly only if it fulfils conditions (1) and (2).

Clearly, ACP can get no grip at this point of the Third Meditation. As Descartes points out, he is unable to determine the causes of his 'adventitious' (or indeed any)[5] ideas, far less determine whether his ideas accurately represent their causes. Thus, if he attempts to apply ACP under these conditions, he would not know whether an idea is true or false.[6] (For example, since he does not know whether his idea of the sun is caused by the actual sun, much less whether it accurately represents that sun, he is unable to determine whether such an idea represents truly or not in ACP.)

Thus, ACP cannot be applied at this point of the Third Meditation. Descartes then searches for an alternative account of true representation which he can apply within his current epistemic constraints. I next give an account of this search, and show how his findings lead to the Third Meditation description of a materially false idea as one that 'represents no things as things'.

Descartes's search for an alternative account of representation and the Causal Principle

Having failed in his previous attempt to establish that something exists outside him, Descartes writes:

> But now it occurs to me that there is another way of investigating whether some of the things of which I possess ideas exist outside me.
>
> (AT 7: 40, CSM 2: 27)

This new method of investigation once again involves closely inspecting his ideas. Descartes finds that, insofar as these ideas are modes of thought, he, *qua* thinking substance, could be construed as their cause (as he puts it, 'they all appear to come from within me in the same fashion': AT 7: 40, CSM 2: 280). But insofar as 'different ideas represent different things', they contain different degrees of objective reality (AT 7: 40, CSM 2: 28).

As seen earlier, Descartes had established that he could not determine the precise cause of an idea from inspecting its content. He now reconsiders the contents of his ideas, and asks what he *can* know about the nature of the cause that produces a given content. To answer this, Descartes first establishes the general relationship between an (efficient and total)[7] cause and its effect.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Descartes's 'natural light' leads him to accept the Causal Principle, which states that there must be as much reality in the cause of an effect as in the effect itself. This principle applies not only to effects that are 'formally real' but also to the objective reality in ideas:

> [I]n order for a given idea to contain such and such objective reality, it must surely derive it from some cause which contains at least as much formal reality as there is objective reality in the idea.
>
> (AT 7: 41, CSM 2: 28–9)

Thus, Descartes arrives at a crucial principle of inference governing the relationship of an idea and its cause: that is, given a certain degree of objective reality in an idea, one can infer that the cause of the idea's objective reality must have an equal or greater degree of formal reality.

What does Descartes mean by a cause with formal reality? One view would see him as requiring that such causes must be real, but need not necessarily exist. However, Descartes writes at the end of the passage explicating the Causal Principle:

> If the objective reality of any of my ideas turns out to be so great that I am sure that the same reality does not reside in me, either formally or eminently, and hence that I myself cannot be its cause, it will necessarily follow that I am not alone in the world, but that some other thing which is the cause of this idea also exists [*existere*].
>
> (AT 7: 42, CSM 2: 29)

Descartes maintains that, if he has an idea with objective reality greater than his own formal reality, then he himself cannot be the cause of that idea. In that case, he argues, some other cause with the requisite formal reality must also *exist* (not merely have being). The cause of the objective reality in an idea must not only be real; it must also exist.[8]

Thus, Descartes's discussion of the Causal Principle establishes at least that the cause of the objective reality in an idea is an *existing* thing. Unfortunately, not much else is known about such a cause, for Descartes also points out that an idea's containing a certain degree of objective reality *gives no precise indication as to what its actual existing cause is.* The objective reality in the idea may be formally contained in its existing cause (in which case the cause would have the same degree of reality) or eminently contained in such a cause (in which case the cause would have a greater reality).

Since the content of an idea can give no precise indication of what its cause is, it is confirmed that ACP cannot be reinstated at this point. So what Descartes does now is to provide an alternative account of representation. He does this by focusing on the objective reality in the ideas themselves (as opposed to trying to determine their external causes).

Objective reality and Descartes's alternative account of representation

Descartes's views on objective reality have been widely discussed in the secondary literature. Obviously, justice cannot be done here to the many interesting and complex discussions in this chapter. In what follows, I argue directly for a particular

reading of what Cartesian objective reality amounts to, and offer textual argument to support this reading.

Descartes's debt to the late-Scholastic philosophers – and in particular to Suárez – on the question of objective reality has been sufficiently noted.[9] Earlier, it was argued that an attempt to understand Cartesian material falsity by reference to Suárez's views must involve the recognition that the Cartesian idea shares certain similarities to the Suárezian apprehension of *conjunctions/disjunctions*. (In particular, both would provide 'material' for false judgements, when what they represent as being the case does not actually obtain.) However, Descartes also evidently draws on other elements in the Suárezian account that relate to the *simplex apprehensio* to construct his account of ideas. That he does draw from these disparate components of Suárez's view to construct a new position of his own should not be surprising – Descartes is well-known for his readiness to borrow from the store of concepts and terms produced by his late-Scholastic predecessors, and for being prepared to cannibalize these concepts to suit his purposes. (Unfortunately, he was also reluctant to spell out explicitly the differences between his own cannibalized version and his predecessors', thus presenting a major challenge to those who would illuminate his work by reference to these predecessors.)

In his writings, Suárez employed a distinction that had been drawn by other Scholastic philosophers such as Toletus (Francisco de Toledo, 1534–1596) and Eustace of St Paul (1573–1650) – namely, the distinction between the formal concept and the objective concept. According to Suárez, the formal concept is a qualitative modification of the mind that is, as it were, 'an offspring of the mind' (*proles mentis*) (DM 2, 1: 1). Again, the formal concept also has representative purport – it is that which represents a particular object.

As for the objective concept, Suárez describes it as that 'which is properly and immediately known or represented through the formal concept' (DM 2, 1: 1). That is, the objective concept is represented by the formal concept. The objective concept thus stands in relation to the formal concept as represented to representer. As Wells emphasizes, the objective concept is 'not to be taken as an "image" or as that which represents'; it is rather the object *of* representation by the formal concept (Wells 1990: 41).

For Suárez, this object of representation can either be a 'real thing' or a 'being of reason'. By a 'real thing', Suárez means a 'possible essence' or the essence of a thing that could possibly exist. Such real things need not actually exist. Candidates for such possible essences would include geometrical figures such as triangles and chiliagons. 'Beings of reason' are 'things' which are not real in any way, such as self-contradictory objects that are not possible essences.

There is little doubt that the distinction between the formal and objective concept finds its way in some manner into the Cartesian account of ideas (though the *extent* to which Descartes adopted the original distinction will be a matter for subsequent discussion). Descartes has often been noted for using the term 'idea' in two ways – to mean mental acts, or to mean mental objects or 'things' to which the mind is directed (see, for instance, Kenny 1968: 99 and Wilson 1978: 156). He himself states in the Preface to the *Meditations* that 'there is an ambiguity . . . in the term "idea"':

> 'Idea' can be taken materially, as an operation of the intellect [or] . . . it can be taken objectively, as the thing [*res*] represented by that operation.
>
> (AT 7: 8, CSM 2: 7)

Chappell, in his discussion of this distinction, denominates an idea 'taken materially' as an $idea_m$ and an idea 'taken objectively' as an $idea_o$ (Chappell 1986: 178). I shall adopt the same abbreviations for convenience.

Descartes's claim concerning the 'ambiguity' between the two senses of idea needs careful consideration. He is not saying that any given idea can be seen in two ways – either as an $idea_m$ or an $idea_o$. Rather, the $idea_m$ is a different kind of animal from the $idea_o$. As Descartes makes clear in the above passage, an $idea_m$ is an operation of the intellect by which the $idea_o$ may be represented. The $idea_m$ is a mental operation or a cognitive act of the thinker. On the other hand, the $idea_o$ is the thing (*res*) represented by the $idea_m$. Commentators such as Kenny and Wells accept that this $idea_o$, *qua* a thing that is the object of thought, has a reality independent of the cognitive activity of the thinker (see, for example, Kenny 1978: 115–16 and Wells 1990: 46–7).[10] The relation of $idea_o$ to $idea_m$ is then that of the (independent) thing being represented to the representing act by the thinker.

The Cartesian $idea_m$ bears some resemblance to the Suárezian formal concept, insofar as it represents a particular object to the mind. Again, Descartes describes such an idea as a mode of thought that 'comes from within' the thinker (AT 7: 40, CSM 2: 27–8). It thus resembles the Suárezian formal concept, which is a qualitative modification of mind that is 'an offspring of the mind'. Again, the Cartesian $idea_o$, insofar as it is the thing represented by the $idea_m$, obviously approximates the Suárezian objective concept.

Descartes thus evidently draws on the Suárezian distinction between the formal and objective concept in making his own distinction between the $idea_m$ and the $idea_o$. Nevertheless, as will be shown later, the distinction Descartes draws between his two kinds of ideas is not entirely congruent with the distinction between the Suárezian formal and objective concepts. But for the present, let us connect these findings concerning Cartesian $ideas_m$ and $ideas_o$ to the Third Meditation account of objective reality in ideas.

We can now revisit in greater detail the passage in which Descartes, seeking an alternative route to what exists outside himself, first introduces the notion of objective reality:

> But it now occurs to me that there is another way of investigating whether some of the things of which I possess ideas exist outside me. Insofar as the ideas are simply modes of thought, there is no recognizable inequality among them: they all appear to come from within me in the same fashion. But insofar as *different ideas represent different things*, it is clear that they differ widely. Undoubtedly, the *ideas which represent substances to me* amount to something more and, so to speak, *contain within themselves more objective reality* than the ideas which merely *represent modes or accidents*.
>
> (AT 7: 40, CSM 2: 27–8, emphasis mine)

At first sight, it might appear that ideas insofar as they are modes of thought 'with no recognizable inequality among them' are ideas$_m$, while those that represent different things and thus contain or have[11] in them different levels of objective reality are ideas$_o$. This reading would be erroneous. The ideas that contain objective reality are those *representing* different things (infinite substance, finite substance, modes) to the thinker. As Descartes had made clear in the Preface, the idea$_o$ is the thing *represented*; the idea that represents must therefore be an idea$_m$. Throughout the passage quoted above, Descartes is consistently writing of ideas$_m$: he points out that ideas$_m$ may from one perspective be seen as merely modes of thought (or operations of intellect), while from another perspective, the same idea$_m$ may be recognized as *representing* some thing. Insofar as the idea$_m$ represents some thing, the idea$_m$ has or contains a certain degree of objective reality in virtue of the thing represented to the mind by that idea (that is, in virtue of that idea$_m$'s idea$_o$). Thus, the idea$_m$ that has a finite substance as its idea$_o$ contains more objective reality than the idea$_m$ which has a finite mode for its idea$_o$.

Commentators often maintain that Descartes held that *all* ideas$_m$ contain objective reality.[12] I shall take the perhaps less popular line that only some ideas$_m$ contain objective reality, while others do not.

There is in fact strong evidence in support of the view that not all ideas$_m$ contain objective reality. Offered below are three arguments in favour of this position.

(1) In the Second Set of Replies, Descartes defines the objective reality of an idea$_m$ as 'the being of the thing [*res*] which is represented by an idea$_m$, insofar as this exists in the idea' (AT 7: 161, CSM 2: 113). As we have seen, Descartes had made clear in the Preface to the *Meditations* that the idea$_o$ is the thing [*res*] represented by the idea$_m$. We can thus infer from the Second Set of Replies that the objective reality in an idea$_m$ either is, or derives from,[13] the thing represented by that idea$_m$ (that is, its idea$_o$). An idea$_m$ then contains objective reality insofar as there is an idea$_o$, or thing (*res*) with being, represented by that idea.

Now note that Descartes in his Third Meditation discussion of the Causal Principle, states that

> the mode of being by which a thing [*res*] is [*est*] objectively in the intellect by way of an idea, imperfect though it may be, is certainly not nothing, and so it cannot come from nothing.
>
> (AT 7: 41, CSM 2: 29)*

Insofar as an idea$_m$ contains objective reality, the thing (*res*) it represents (that is, its idea$_o$) possesses objective being, and thus it 'cannot come from nothing' – in other words, it must have an existing cause.

Significantly, he then goes on to claim in TMD that '[ideas that] represent no things [*nullas res*]' are *precisely* those that 'proceed from nothing' (AT 7: 44, CSM 2: 30)*. For Descartes, an idea$_m$ that represents no thing (in other words, that does not have an idea$_o$) is one that 'comes from nothing' – that is, it does not have an existing cause. Now, given the Causal Principle, Descartes must accept that an effect cannot have *more* reality (objective or actual) than its cause. In that case, an idea$_m$ that

'proceeds from nothing' cannot contain any objective reality. Thus, not all ideas$_m$ contain objective reality.[14]

(2) It has been plausibly argued that an idea$_m$ contains objective reality if it represents a possible existent (for instance, by Field 1993, Wells 1990, and Wilson 1978). As mentioned, when an idea$_m$ contains objective reality, it represents a thing with objective being (its idea$_o$). Substantial evidence has been marshalled to show that Descartes held a thing that has objective being is one that also has possible existence (see, for example, AT 7: 30, CSM 2: 43 in conjunction with AT 7: 116, CSM 2: 83). Thus an idea$_m$ that contains objective reality is one that represents an object with possible existence. If this is correct, then ideas$_m$ that turn out to represent 'beings of reason' such as self-contradictory objects can contain no objective reality. Self-contradictory objects are by definition those that cannot possibly exist (at least given the laws of nature that God chose to realize in this universe). Thus if ideas$_m$ which contain objective reality are those that represent possible existents, ideas$_m$ which represent self-contradictory objects cannot contain objective reality. Again, not all ideas would contain objective reality.

(3) Finally, that at least *some* ideas of self-contradictory objects can never contain objective reality is necessitated by what Descartes says concerning the Causal Principle. As mentioned, this principle requires that the objective reality contained in an idea$_m$ must derive from an existing cause of equal or greater formal reality. Consider, then, an idea$_m$ of God that represents God as powerless. If this idea contains objective reality, that objective reality must derive from an existing cause. Such a cause would either be a formally real powerless God or some being of greater perfection that eminently contains such a powerless God. But obviously, there cannot exist such a cause.[15] My idea$_m$ of a powerless God is a self-contradictory idea, and as Descartes writes in the Second Replies:

> All self-contradictoriness or impossibility resides solely in our thought . . . it cannot occur in anything which is outside the intellect.
>
> (AT 7: 152, CSM 2: 108)

There obviously cannot exist any formally real powerless God (since the concept is a self-contradictory one). And it cannot be caused by some being of greater perfection than God, since God is the being with the greatest perfection possible. Given the Causal Principle, an idea$_m$ that has no such existing cause cannot contain any objective reality. The idea$_m$ of a powerless God thus contains no objective reality.

In short, there is strong evidence that Descartes accepts that some ideas$_m$ contain objective reality, but others do not. As has just been suggested, the idea$_m$ of a powerless God is one that obviously cannot contain objective reality. But are there ideas$_m$ whose content is such that we can be certain that they *must* contain objective reality?

Descartes indicates that there are.[16] He states in TMD that his 'sensory' ideas of size, shape and so on are clear and distinct (AT 7: 43, CSM 2: 30). This clarity and distinctness is a sufficient condition for concluding that these ideas must contain objective reality. Descartes explains more precisely why such clear and distinct ideas must contain objective reality in the Fifth Meditation:

> I find within me countless ideas of things which even though they may not exist anywhere outside me still cannot be called nothing; for . . . they are not my invention but have their own true and immutable natures. When, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence or form of the triangle which is immutable or eternal . . .
>
> (AT 7: 64, CSM 2: 44–5)

As mentioned, Descartes refers here to a class of ideas$_m$ concerning size, shape and so on that belong to the intellect and/or imagination. In contrast, the clear and distinct ideas$_m$ of size and shape in TMD are 'sensory' (that is, they present size and shape as modes of things existing outside thought). But although the class of ideas referred to in the Fifth Meditation differs in this way from those in TMD, the discussion in the Fifth Meditation is nevertheless instructive with respect to TMD. This is because it makes clear the criteria by which one can determine for certain that a given idea$_m$ (whether intellectual/imaginative or 'sensory') is one that contains objective reality.

In the Fifth Meditation, Descartes points out that when he has a (clear and distinct) idea$_m$ of a triangle, that triangle displays a determinate nature insofar as it exhibits an immutable conformity to geometrical laws. Because of this, an examination of the triangle reveals 'unforeseen and unwilled' consequences (Wilson 1978: 172). One can demonstrate properties of a triangle that one 'did not expect it to have and which are not within [one's] power to change' (Edelberg 1990: 496–7). When the triangle clearly and distinctly manifests such an immutable nature, Descartes can be certain that it is a thing (*res*) with being (that is, a possible existent). As Descartes puts it, this triangle 'cannot be called nothing', even if there never existed such a corporeal triangle outside him. Insofar as his idea$_m$ of the triangle represents a thing (*res*), that idea$_m$ must contain objective reality. Hence, the clear and distinct idea$_m$ of a triangle that conforms immutably to geometrical laws is an idea that contains objective reality. More generally, all ideas$_m$ that clearly and distinctly present a thing with a determinate and immutable nature must contain objective reality.

In short, then, Descartes is able to tell, within the current epistemic constraints that de-bar his use of ACP, that some of his ideas$_m$ must have objective reality, while others cannot. This provides him with an alternative account of true and false representation in ideas.

As we saw, Descartes's attempt in the earlier portion of the Third Meditation to adopt ACP had created difficulties from him: if he could not even tell from the idea$_m$ itself what its actual cause is, how could he tell whether it accurately represents its cause? But he now has an alternative account of representation in which the object represented is not the external cause: instead, it is the 'thing' or object presented in the intellect, which may readily be inspected by the thinker. When the object represented by the idea$_m$ clearly and distinctly reveals a determinate and immutable nature, one knows that the idea$_m$ in question represents a thing or *res* (in other words, it represents an idea$_o$) and contains objective reality. On the other hand,

when the 'object' represented by an $idea_m$ turns out to be self-contradictory (for instance, a powerless God), that $idea_m$ represents no thing and contains no objective reality.

Given the availability of this alternative account, what Descartes does is (temporarily) to *shift the object of representation from the* $idea_m$'s external cause to the object that the $idea_m$ presents to the thinker. For Descartes at this point in the Third Meditation, what an $idea_m$ represents is what it presents to the mind, not the (unknown) cause outside. On this alternative account (hereafter AA):

1 An $idea_m$ is true if it represents a thing with objective being (and contains objective reality).
2 An $idea_m$ is false if it represents no thing with objective being (and contains no objective reality).

I will shortly argue that AA as an account of representation underpins Descartes's claims in TMD. Before we proceed, however, note that the distinction between the Cartesian $idea_m$ and $idea_o$ is obviously not wholly congruent with that between the Suárezian formal and objective concept. It would be helpful to outline briefly the precise divergences between the two.

Suárez on formal and objective concepts vs. Descartes on $ideas_m$ and $ideas_o$

If what I've argued is correct, Descartes's distinction between $ideas_m$ and $ideas_o$ departs considerably from the Suárezian distinction between formal and objective concepts that may have inspired it. At the beginning of the Third Meditation, Descartes describes ideas (strictly taken) as 'as-if images of things'. An idea that is an as-if image of a thing is an idea that purports to represent (faithfully) that thing. According to Descartes's own taxonomy, such an idea would be an $idea_m$ – the representer (of some purported object). Insofar as it is the representer (as opposed to the represented), this $idea_m$ resembles the Suárezian formal concept.

However, note that Descartes carefully specifies that the $idea_m$ is an *as-if* image of a thing. This $idea_m$ differs from the Suárezian formal concept in that it may *falsely* represent. Where the formal concept is straightforwardly an 'image' of an object (so it must always truly represent that object), the $idea_m$ differs in being an *as-if* or *purported* 'image' of the object which may be (materially) false.[17]

Again, Suárez accepts that the formal concept can represent both things and 'beings of reason'. In contrast, Descartes holds that $ideas_m$ (strictly taken) must always at least *purport* to represent things. Descartes claims in the Third Meditation that $ideas_m$ are 'as-if images of *things* [*res*]', or again, 'as-if of things' (AT 7: 44, CSM 2: 25) – by which he means that they are as-if images either of *real* things ($ideas_o$) or, I shall argue later, of *existing* things. But Descartes apparently thinks that $ideas_m$ (strictly taken) cannot be as-if images of *no*-things – that is, that ideas cannot purport to represent no things.

In the *Conversation with Burman*, Burman refers to the passage in TMD in which Descartes claims that 'there can be no ideas that are not as-if of things', and

responds that one can have 'an idea of nothing, and this is not an idea of a thing'. Descartes's reply, as recorded by Burman, is caustic:

> That idea is purely negative, and can hardly be called an idea. In this passage the author is taking the word 'idea' in its strict and narrow sense.
>
> (AT 5: 153, CSMK: 338)

An $idea_m$, strictly taken, must always be as-if of a thing – that is, purport to represent a thing. If it is an $idea_m$ that is 'negative' (in other words, not as-if of a thing), it is not strictly speaking an $idea_m$ at all.

This is not to say, of course, that Descartes thinks that all $ideas_m$ are *actually* of things. As TMD makes evident, some $ideas_m$ may eventually turn out to represent no things – but such $ideas_m$, *qua* as-if of things, must have *purported* to represent things. Thus, the Cartesian $idea_m$ stands in contrast with the Suárezian formal concept, which can purport to represent no thing – and would, in such a case, also *really* represent no thing. (That is, the formal concept would truly represent a false object.)

Given the above account, we also see how the Cartesian $idea_o$ differs from the Suárezian objective concept. Descartes states in the Preface to the *Meditations* that the idea taken objectively (that is, the $idea_o$) is the *thing* represented by the $idea_m$. Descartes then goes on (as I've shown) to use *consistently* the term 'thing' (*res*) to mean a real 'thing', both in the Third Meditation and the definition of objective reality in the Second Set of Replies. Thus, the $idea_o$ is the real thing (*res*) represented by the $idea_m$.[18]

Commentators have often taken the $idea_o$ to be the object of *any* $idea_m$ (whether the object in question is a real thing or no thing). However, if one accepts that Descartes uses the term 'thing' (*res*) consistently, as I've indicated he has, then the $idea_o$ must be limited to real things. This being the case, the $idea_o$ would differ from the Suárezian objective concept: whereas the latter includes not just things but beings of reason, the former is confined to things.

In short, while Descartes may have borrowed from Suárez's distinction between the formal and objective concepts, his own distinction between $ideas_m$ and $ideas_o$ differed significantly from Suárez's distinction. We now proceed to examine the account of false ideas in TMD.

The Third Meditation discussion of materially false ideas

First of all, it should be noted that the ideas of cold, colour and so on that are mentioned in TMD are evidently $ideas_m$. Descartes states of these ideas that they 'represent no things' or 'represent no things as things'. Such ideas are representers – and hence are $ideas_m$. By parity, the clear and distinct ideas of size, shape and so on mentioned in TMD are also (as argued earlier) $ideas_m$. As the exposition of Descartes's views from this point onwards will mostly be concerned with his $ideas_m$, I shall (unless otherwise stated) use the word 'ideas' to mean $ideas_m$.

I have mentioned that it is AA that underpins the discussion in TMD. That this is so would make sense of Descartes's various claims concerning the ideas of colour,

cold and so on mentioned therein. Consider Descartes's opening definition of what a true or false idea is:

> But for all the rest, including light and colours, sounds, smells, tastes, heat and cold and the other tactile qualities, I think of these only in a very confused and obscure way, to the extent that *I do not even know whether they are true or false, that is, whether they are ideas of things or no things*.
>
> (AT 7: 43, CSM 2: 30, emphasis mine)*

Here, Descartes identifies a true idea as one of a thing, and a false one as of no thing. This makes sense in the framework of AA. In AA, an idea represents what it presents to the mind. A true idea is thus one that represents a thing with objective being; a false idea is one that represents a 'thing' with no being (that is to say, no thing at all).

Again, AA also make good sense of Descartes's alternative description of a false idea as one that 'represents no things as things' (AT 7: 43, CSM 2: 30). Under AA, all ideas purport to represent a 'real' thing (that is, things with objective being). For instance, an idea of cold purports to represent 'real' cold. False ideas are then those which purport to represent a thing with objective being but really do not do so (as, for instance, when cold itself turns out to be a privation). Thus, false ideas 'represent no things as things'.

Descartes had earlier established that an idea which represents a thing with objective being must have some existing cause (whatever that cause is). This would explain a significant feature of the Third Meditation discussion on material falsity, namely why an idea's being true does not depend on what its existing cause is (but merely on its *having* an existing cause). For instance, Descartes writes of the confused ideas of colour, cold, heat and so on:

> If [such ideas] are true, then since the reality they represent is so slight I cannot distinguish it from no thing, I do not see why they cannot originate from myself.
>
> (AT 7: 44, CSM 2: 30)*

Here, Descartes accepts that if his ideas of cold and colour were true, they would be so even if he does not know what their cause is (he himself might be their cause). Similarly, Descartes maintains that his clear and distinct ideas of size and shape are true (AT 7: 43, CSM 2: 29–30), but accepts that they may have himself as their cause:

> As for all the other elements which make up the ideas of corporeal things, namely, extension, shape, position and movement, these are not formally contained in me, since I am nothing but a thinking thing; but since they are merely modes of a substance, and I am a substance, it seems possible that they are contained me eminently.
>
> (AT 7: 45, CSM 2: 31)

In shifting the object of representation from the idea's external cause to the thing that the idea presents, Descartes evades (for the time being) questions as to whether the idea accurately represents its cause. This shift in the object of representation also explains this (possibly puzzling) statement in the first proof of God's existence:

> [This idea of God] is utterly clear and distinct, and contains in itself more objective reality than any other idea; hence there is no idea which is *in itself* [*per se*] truer or less liable to be suspected of falsehood. This idea of a supremely perfect and infinite being is, I say, true . . . for *although one may imagine that such a being does not exist, it cannot be supposed that such an idea represents something unreal, as I said with regard to the idea of cold*.
>
> (AT 7: 46, CSM 2: 31–2, emphasis mine)

If the idea of God represents the 'real' thing it presents to the mind, it would explain why Descartes states that the idea is 'in itself' true. In AA, one can determine that a particular idea is true without having to refer to its external cause. (When an idea is clear and distinct, one is certain that it represents a thing, and thus is true.) Since Descartes can determine that the idea of God is true simply by examining the idea itself, he would maintain that the idea is 'in itself' true.

Again, the adoption of AA explains why Descartes is able in the above passage simultaneously to imagine both that God may not exist, and that the idea of God cannot represent something unreal. When Descartes contemplates the clear and distinct idea of God, he cannot but accept that it represents a thing with objective being. However, this does not in itself necessarily involve a recognition that the formally real cause of the idea must be God Himself (only that it *has* a formally real cause). Hence, it does not involve a commitment to God's existence. The actual recognition of God's existence needs a further step in which it is shown that the objective reality contained in the idea *can have no other cause than God*. Thus, Descartes might well recognize that the idea of God cannot represent something unreal without (yet) admitting that God exists.

Descartes's reinstatement of ACP in the Meditations

Descartes adopted AA in his Third Meditation account of ideas because of epistemic constraints at this point. I now argue that, as new discoveries are made in the *Meditations* and he is released from these constraints, he reinstates ACP in place of AA. Correspondingly, there is a change in the criteria by which such ideas are determined as false.

Descartes's main goal in the Third Meditation was to establish that something exists beyond himself. Working initially with the assumption that a true idea should accurately represents its cause, Descartes was unable to establish that anything existed beyond him. In contrast, the adoption of AA as an account of true representation enables him to establish the existence of God. As Descartes shows (AT 7: 45–7, CSM 2: 31–2), not only is the idea of God true insofar as it clearly and distinctly contains objective reality, and thus must have a formally real cause, the supreme

level of objective reality contained in the idea requires that it *could only have* existing God as its formally real cause. That is, God must exist.

After establishing that the precise cause of his clear and distinct idea of God must be an existing God, Descartes can see his idea of God as representing its existing cause – God Himself – rather than the thing with objective being it presents. Thus, he can now reinstate ACP at least with respect to his idea of God. (That is, his idea of God would now be true only if it had existing God as its cause, and if it accurately represented God.)

Descartes then establishes that the omnipotence and utter perfection of God implies that God cannot be a deceiver, since deception is an imperfection and 'depends upon some defect' (AT 7: 52, CSM 2: 35). Having established this, Descartes proceeds to reinstate ACP for the corporeal world as well.

Descartes reinstates the existence of the corporeal world (insofar as its properties are 'comprised within the subject matter of mathematics') in the early Sixth Meditation (AT 7: 78–80, CSM 2: 54–5). As mentioned in Chapter 2, Descartes finds in the course of the proof that he not only knows that his 'ideas of sensible objects' have objective reality, he also knows the *precise* cause of the objective reality in these ideas. Given that God is not a deceiver, the objective reality of such ideas cannot be caused (eminently) by God or non-material substance, but must 'come from' extended things themselves. Thus, Descartes can now reinstate ACP. The 'ideas of sensible objects' would now represent, not the thing with objective being they present to the mind, but their external cause.[19] A more through discussion of this proof is found in Chapter 4.

Moreover, with the reinstatement of this corporeal world in the Sixth Meditation, Descartes now returns to the conditions under which ACP can be fruitfully applied to the ideas of *particular* corporeal things (such as the sun and stars). Since he now knows there is an external world with various definite features, he can concern himself with whether his ideas of these various definite features accurately represent the features themselves. For instance, he can concern himself with whether his idea of the (existing) sun as very small accurately represents the actual sun from which this idea derives.

In ACP, the representational failure in false ideas can take the following forms. First, an idea is false if it fails to represent any existing cause. For example, the idea of a powerless God (shown earlier to have no existing cause) would be such an idea. Second, an idea is also false if it does represent an existing cause, but fails to represent accurately that case. An idea in this second category can fail in one of two ways:

1 The idea represents wrongly what its cause is. (For instance, the sensory ideas of the extended world, if they turn out to have been eminently caused by God, would have represented wrongly their cause and would have been false.)
2 The idea represents correctly what its cause is, but mis-portrays that cause. (For instance, the idea of the sun as very small is false because, although it represents correctly what its cause is – the sun – it does not accurately portray that cause.)

Evidence that Descartes is back to adopting ACP for particular objects in the external world may be found in his Sixth Meditation account of how his beliefs about the external world could be false. Among these are the beliefs

> that any space in which nothing is occurring to stimulate my senses must be empty . . . that stars and towers and other distant bodies have the same size and shape which they present to my senses, and other examples of this kind.
>
> (AT 7: 82, CSM 2: 56–57)

Descartes in this passage speaks of false *beliefs*, where such beliefs are formed through judgements by the will, based on perceptions of the intellect. Thus, any considered interpretation of this passage must involve a properly defended position on the Cartesian relationship between ideas or perceptions and judgements. I argued earlier for an account of Cartesian judgement, in which (proper or genuine) judgement is confined to the affirmation or denial of the contents of an idea (expressed in propositional form). This reading will receive a more thorough defence shortly. Meanwhile, on the assumption that this is the role played by judgement in the generation of belief, the passage above would provide evidence that Descartes is operating under ACP.

Under AA, a false idea was one that 'represented no thing' (by which Descartes meant that it represented no thing with objective being). In the passage above, the ideas whose affirmation result in false beliefs are not (materially) false because they represent no thing (with objective being). Rather, they are (materially) false because although they do represent a thing (in this case their existing cause) they *mis*-represent it. For instance, Descartes's idea of spaces where nothing stimulates his senses does represent actual spaces in the material world; however, he mis-represents these spaces in thinking that they are empty. (Affirmation of these spaces as empty then gives rise to a false belief.) Similarly, his ideas of the sizes and shapes of stars and towers are not false because they represent no thing with objective being; they are false because they *mis*-represent their causes – the existing sizes and shapes of stars and towers. As he puts it, these existing stars and towers 'may not have the same size or shape which they present to my senses'.

In short, then, there is good evidence that Descartes's epistemic progress since the Third Meditation has enabled him to reinstate ACP, and its corresponding criteria for true and false representation in ideas, by the middle of the Sixth Meditation. As I shall now argue, it is ACP, not AA, that is implicitly operating in Descartes's response in the Fourth Set of Replies to Arnauld's objections.

The account of materially false ideas in the Fourth Set of Replies

Descartes's account of false ideas in the Fourth Set of Replies is difficult to decipher. Not only are the claims of significant portions of the text opaque, but what is comprehensible seems to be at odds with his claims concerning such ideas in the Third Meditation (and in particular with TMD). An initial reading certainly suggests that Wilson's earlier-mentioned description of Descartes's views on material falsity as a 'model of confusion confounded' is entirely apposite.

I now argue that the account of false ideas in the Fourth Set of Replies is indeed a departure from that of the Third Meditation. However, it is not an *abrupt* departure – or worse, an incoherent backtracking – from the earlier account. In the

Fourth Set of Replies, ACP is back in operation as an account of representation, a move rendered possible by the epistemic progress made during and after the Third Meditation. As a result of this epistemic progress, Descartes is able in the Fourth Set of Replies to offer his *finalized* account on what it is that makes such ideas as those of heat and cold fail in their representational function. But this finalized account arises from the change in Descartes's epistemic status in the course of following the 'order of reasons' in the *Meditations*: it is not sudden or incoherent, but a wholly understandable development or progression from his earlier position.

I begin first by offering evidence that ACP is in operation in the treatment of the ideas of heat and cold found in the Fourth Set of Replies. Descartes, however, does not discuss material falsity only in relation to the ideas of heat and cold: he also examines other kinds of false ideas. I will argue that ACP is also in operation in his discussion of these other false ideas. Finally, an alternative – and widely accepted – interpretation of material falsity (which ostensibly finds its primary support in the Fourth Set of Replies) is examined. It is argued that this interpretation is not borne out by the text.

ACP and the idea of cold in the Fourth Set of Replies

Just before his account of false ideas in TMD, Descartes had pointed out that certain of his ideas had been as-if of 'things located outside me' (AT 7: 38, CSM 2: 26). However, he had not known at that point whether such things existed outside him, far less whether his ideas were accurate representations of such things. Hence, his account in TMD of material falsity in corporeal ideas made no reference to such a world. He saw an idea as being true if it represented a thing with objective being, and false if it represented no such thing. Of the 'sensory' idea of cold, he tentatively suggested that if the idea turned out to be true and to represent a thing, he himself *qua* thinking thing could be its cause. If the idea turned out to be false, then this would simply be because it represented no thing, and thus 'proceeded from nothing' (AT 7: 43–4, CSM 2: 30).

This can be contrasted with the Fourth Set of Replies. Since the corporeal world has been reinstated in the Sixth Meditation, Descartes can now give his final account of the representational breakdown in his idea of cold:

> I do not claim that an idea's material falsity results from some positive entity; it arises solely from the obscurity of the idea . . . [T]he obscurity of the idea [of cold] is the only thing that leads me to judge [that is, affirm] that *the idea of the sensation of cold represents some object called 'cold' which is located outside me*.
>
> (AT 7: 234–35, CSM 2: 164, emphasis mine)

Descartes now does not see the idea of cold as false because it represents a 'thing' with no being. Rather, he has established that there is a material world existing outside him, and so corporeal ideas may once again purport to represent objects in that world. Accordingly, he now says that, if the idea of cold is false, it is because the idea represents cold *as an existing object in the corporeal world*, and this is not the case.

Again, we have seen in earlier chapters that Arnauld had criticized Descartes's account of false ideas in TMD by maintaining that the idea of cold could not represent cold as other than it really is. Thus, for instance, Arnauld had written that 'if cold is an absence, there cannot be an idea of cold which represents it to me as a positive thing' (AT 7: 206, CSM 2: 145). Arnauld evidently assumed (here and for much of his discussion) that the Cartesian idea is roughly equivalent to the formal concept in the traditional *simplex apprehensio*, in that this idea cannot represent its object as other than it really is. However, Arnauld also includes in his discussion in the Fourth Set of Objections this well-known passage:

> What is the idea of cold? It is coldness itself in so far as it exists objectively in the intellect. But if cold is a privation, it cannot exist objectively in the intellect by means of an idea whose objective existence is a positive entity. Therefore, if cold is merely a privation, there cannot ever be a positive idea of it . . .
>
> (AT 7: 206, CSM 2: 145)*

This passage is an aberration for Arnauld, for here he evidently uses 'idea' as an equivalent to the traditional *objective* concept, as opposed to the formal concept: the 'idea of cold' here is something that has objective existence (or being) in the intellect.

While Descartes generally uses 'idea' in the Fourth Set of Replies to mean ideas$_m$, he goes along to some extent with Arnauld's usage of 'idea' in his reply to this particular objection. That is, in his reply, Descartes sometimes follows Arnauld in taking 'idea' to mean the *object* of representation. Descartes's response to this objection is as follows:

> When my critic says that the idea of cold 'is coldness itself in so far as it exists objectively in the intellect', I think we need to make a distinction. For it often happens in the case of obscure and confused ideas – and the ideas of heat and cold fall into this category – that an idea is referred to something other than that of which it is in fact the idea. Thus, if cold is simply a privation, the idea of cold is not coldness itself as it exists objectively in the intellect, but something else, which I erroneously mistake for this privation, namely a sensation which in fact has no existence outside the intellect.
>
> (AT 7: 233, CSM 2: 163)*

Note first that Descartes does not rebut Arnauld by pointing out that, if cold is actually a privation, the idea of cold (taken objectively) in fact is not a thing ('coldness') existing objectively in the intellect, but a 'no thing' that proceeds from nothing. This is how one would expect him to reply, if he still accepted the position adopted in TMD. But it is not the line he actually takes.

Instead, Descartes points out that if cold is actually a privation, then the idea of cold (which in this context is the *represented* object 'cold') is not coldness existing objectively in the intellect, but is instead a 'sensation which . . . has no existence outside the intellect'. For Descartes, then, the sensation of cold is the actual object of

an idea$_m$ of cold. That is, the idea$_m$ of cold is an idea *of* the sensation of cold. However, because this idea$_m$ is obscure and confused, it is 'referred' not to the sensation 'of which it is in fact the idea', but to something else – the external corporeal world. Insofar as the idea$_m$ of cold is 'referred to' the external world, cold must evidently be represented by that idea$_m$ as an object (or property) existing in the corporeal world. But if cold is in fact a privation or absence, there is no such actual object 'cold' in the external world. In that case, the false idea of cold results from the mistaken assumption that what is in effect a sensation is a feature of the external world.

Again, it is evident that ACP is in operation, not AA. For Descartes here, the idea$_m$ of cold that represents cold as an existing property of the external world would be false if cold isn't such a property.

Before we proceed to examine the other examples of false ideas in the Fourth Set of Replies, one point needs to be noted. Descartes's response to Arnauld makes clear that the idea$_m$ of cold in the accounts of material falsity in the Third Meditation and Fourth Set of Replies is *not* to be identified with the sensation of cold itself. Wilson in her paper evidently takes the ideas of heat and cold in TMD and the Fourth Set of Replies to mean the sensations of heat and cold. For instance, she describes the 'confused and obscure' ideas of 'lights and colours, sound etc.' of TMD as '*sensations* of light and colours, sounds etc.' (Wilson 1990: 3, emphasis mine). The very title of her paper is 'Descartes on the Representationality of *Sensation*'. Alison Simmons similarly takes TMD and the Fourth Set of Replies to be concerned with sensations. Simmons argues that Descartes has three different strands of thought (not easily reconcilable) as to whether, and how, sensations represent their object. She maintains that, in TMD and the Fourth Set of Replies, Descartes portrays sensations as '*appear*[*ing*] or *purport*[*ing*] to represent things in extramental corporeal reality', though they may not really do so (Simmons 1999: 349). In contrast, Richard Field takes the ideas of heat and cold in TMD and the Fourth Set of Replies to be, not the sensations themselves, but the *ideas* of the sensations (Field 1993: 323–4).

The response by Descartes to Arnauld considered above suggests that Field is right on this point. In the first passage I quoted from the Fourth Set of Replies, Descartes specifically states that it is 'the *idea* of the sensation of cold', and not the sensation of cold, which is judged (that is, affirmed by the will) to '[represent] some object called 'cold' which is located outside me' (AT 7: 234–5, CSM 2: 164, emphasis mine). Again, as we've just seen, Descartes tells Arnauld that the sensation of cold is the actual *object* of the idea$_m$ of cold. That the ideas of cold are ideas *of* the sensation of cold will be important in my subsequent defence of my reading of false ideas against alternative interpretations. Meanwhile, we may look at Descartes's discussion of other false ideas in the Fourth Set of Replies.

ACP and the other false ideas in the Fourth Set of Replies

Discussions of Cartesian material falsity tend to focus on how ideas such as heat, cold, and colour might be false. However, in the Fourth Set of Replies, Descartes discusses other kinds of ideas that might be false. These other putatively false ideas

must be taken into consideration in any attempt to understand Descartes's position on material falsity.

We have seen how Descartes's reply to Arnauld on the idea of cold reveals that his final position is that the false idea of cold is one that purports to 'refer to' or represent an object, 'cold', in the external world, where no such corresponding object exists. ACP is obviously in operation in Descartes's treatment of the false idea of cold. Another indication that ACP is in operation in the Fourth Set of Replies can be seen in Descartes's subsequent point concerning the idea of God:

> [That the idea might be false] does not apply to the idea of God, or at least the idea of God which is clear and distinct, since it cannot be said to refer to that with which it does not conform [*non fit conformis*]. But as for the confused ideas of gods which are concocted by idolaters, I see no reason why they cannot be called materially false . . .
>
> (AT 7: 233, CSM 2: 163)*

In this passage, Descartes maintains that the clear and distinct idea of God cannot be false for it cannot 'refer to that with which it does not conform'. For Descartes, an idea 'conforms' to its object when it resembles it.[20] In claiming that the clear and distinct idea of God cannot be false because it must always resemble (that is, accurately portray) what it represents, Descartes implicitly accepts that those ideas that are not clear and distinct *can* be false when they fail to resemble or accurately portray what they represent.

Descartes's position here thus stands in clear contrast to that in TMD. In TMD, what an idea referred to or represented was the 'thing' it presented to the mind. Thus, either an idea was true (when it represented a real thing) or it was false (when it represented no thing). In such a case, one could say, an idea either referred to (represented) a thing with which it conformed completely, or it did not refer to (represent) a thing at all. Now, however, Descartes accepts that an idea can refer to (represent) an object, but still fail to conform to it. The reason for this, of course, is that Descartes now sees his ideas as representing *existing* objects. An idea can now be false if the existing object it represents is not as it is presented in the idea.

While Descartes intimates in the passage above that while the clear and distinct idea of God cannot be false, he thinks it is possible for an idea of God that is not clear and distinct to be false. In a letter to Claude Clerselier (1614–1684) in 1645, Descartes gives an example of such a confused and obscure idea of God:

> When the ancients referred to many gods they did not mean many all-powerful gods, but only many very powerful gods, above whom they imagined a single Jupiter as sovereign; and consequently, to this Jupiter alone they applied the idea of the true God, this idea being presented to them in a confused manner.
>
> (AT 4: 188, CSMK: 248)

Descartes accepts that, in conceiving of Jupiter as a single sovereign God, the ancients applied the idea of the true God to Jupiter. That is, their idea of Jupiter as a

singly sovereign God *is* an idea of the true God. Nevertheless, this idea is confused and does not accurately represent God (presumably because Jupiter also exhibits characteristics such as duplicity and lechery, which could not be ascribed to the true God). The account of representation here too presupposes that ACP, and not AA, is in operation, since it assumes that an idea may inaccurately represent its object.

After discussing the clear and distinct idea of the true God, Descartes goes on to write in the Fourth Set of Replies:

> [A]s for the confused ideas of gods which are concocted by idolaters, I see no reason why they too cannot be called materially false.
>
> (AT 7: 233, CSM 2: 163)

Whether the confused ideas of gods concocted by idolaters are (inaccurate) representations of the true God would, in the light of the claims by Descartes to Clerselier, depend on whether such ideas represent the god in question to be singly sovereign. But whether the idolater's idea of a god does succeed in representing the true God or not, it is evident that this materially false idea of god would purport to represent an *existing* god, rather than a god with objective being: the idolater is presumably idolatrous by virtue of representing a god to exist, and worshipping the god assumed to exist. Here, too, ACP rather than AA is in operation.

One final and important indication in the Fourth Set of Replies that the notion of material falsity has developed since the Third Meditation is found in the following passage:

> [I]deas which give the judgement little or no scope for error do not seem as much entitled to be called materially false as those which give great scope for error . . . The greatest scope for error is provided by the ideas which arise from the sensations of appetite. Thus the idea of thirst which the patient with dropsy [oedema, or water retention, generally caused by renal failure] has does indeed give [her] material for error, since it can lead [her] to judge that a drink will do [her] good, when in fact it will do [her] harm.
>
> (AT 7: 234, CSM 2: 163–64)*

In the passage, Descartes sees the 'ideas arising from the sensations of appetite' as providing the most scope for error (and hence the most entitled to be called false), because they misled us about what is beneficial or harmful to us. For instance, the idea of thirst in the dropsical human misleads her about what is beneficial to her.

In the late Sixth Meditation, Descartes had cited the example of the idea of thirst in the dropsical human, in connection with the errors that pertain to such humans as embodied thinkers. He concludes towards the end of the Sixth Meditation, after examining such cases of error, that 'the nature of [the human] as a combination of mind and body is such that it is bound to mislead [her] from time to time' (AT 7: 88, CSM 2: 61).

Descartes's inclusion of this example of the idea of thirst among false ideas in the Fourth Set of Replies clearly shows that the criteria governing material falsity in an

idea alters as it keeps pace with Descartes's various discoveries. As Descartes gains fresh insights, a false idea develops from one that does not represent a thing with objective being to one that fails (for whatever reason) to represent correctly an external cause. Now finally, to accommodate the findings of the late Sixth Meditation, it is seen as one that provides material for, not just false judgements about the causes of the ideas, but also for false judgements about what is beneficial or harmful to us as embodied thinkers.

That ACP is in operation in the Fourth Set of Replies offers retrospective support for my earlier claim that ACP also underlies various passages in the Sixth Meditation. As mentioned earlier, Descartes had suggested in the Sixth Meditation that some of his beliefs about the external world (for instance, that 'any space in which nothing is occurring . . . must be empty' and that 'stars and towers . . . have the same size and shape that they present to my senses') might be mistaken. Descartes does not specifically *state* that these beliefs derive from (putatively) false ideas that wrongly represent their causes, and it might be thought that my claim that Descartes's statements in this passage involve such false ideas is textually unwarranted. However, given that the Fourth Set of Replies evidently operates under ACP and sees ideas as representing their causes, and given that the Sixth Meditation takes place under those same epistemic conditions, it seems reasonable to claim that the forementioned beliefs in the Sixth Meditation similarly derive from false ideas that purport to, but do not accurately, represent their causes.

Note also that the Fourth Replies makes evident that the Sixth Meditation ideas of thirst and other sensations are (materially) false, though the relevant passages in the Sixth Meditation *do not themselves* make any mention at all of material falsity. Thus, the fact that material falsity is also not mentioned in the Sixth Meditation passage concerning empty spaces and stars should not be a barrier to reading this passage as involving claims about false ideas (in a context where ACP is in operation and such ideas purport to represent their cause).

Summary of claims so far

It would be useful to pause and recapitulate the main claims that have been made concerning Cartesian material falsity. A Cartesian false idea is, first of all, an idea_{m} – the representer, or purported representer, of some object. It is false when it does not (for whatever reason) accurately represent that object. When it fails to represent accurately its object, it provides 'material for error' or 'opportunity for error' to the thinker, insofar as the thinker would be tempted to affirm the content of the idea (stated propositionally), and so make a false judgement, and fall into error.

Within the epistemic constraints of the Third Meditation, the object represented by the idea_{m} is its idea_{o} (or the thing with objective being presented in the intellect). Thus, within this context, an idea would be false if it represented no thing with being (that is, if it contained no objective reality).

Released from the epistemic constraints of the Third Meditation, Descartes sees an idea as representing its cause. On this account of representation, an idea is false if:

1 it represents no cause;
2 it does not represent its cause accurately, either by:

   a wrongly representing what its cause is; or
   b correctly representing what its cause is, but inaccurately portraying that cause.

Towards the end of the Sixth Meditation, Descartes accepts that an idea can also be false if:

3 it does not represent accurately what is beneficial/harmful to the embodied thinker.

All these misleading representations would provide 'material for error' or 'opportunity for error', since an affirmation of their content (propositionally stated) would result in genuine or actual error.

The Fourth Set of Replies and an alternative reading

I argued above that the criteria for material falsity shifted between the Third Meditation and Fourth Set of Replies. In the Third Meditation, an idea was false if it represented a 'thing' with no being. By the Sixth Meditation, the object of representation had shifted back to the cause of the idea. Thus, an idea would be false if it failed in one of a variety of criteria (as just outlined above). It is the latter account that is in operation in the Fourth Set of Replies.

Note that one feature of my account of materially false ideas (whether in the Third or Sixth Meditation) is that such ideas always have determinate representational content – put another way, they are representings-*as-thus*. Such ideas *falsely* or *wrongly* represent-as-thus, and the relation between such false ideas and false judgements is as follows: the presence of such ideas tempts the thinker to affirm their content (propositionally stated), resulting in a genuinely false judgement by the thinker.

But Descartes's statements in the Fourth Set of Replies have formed the basis of a substantial set of readings that claim precisely that the Cartesian false idea is *not* one that wrongly or falsely represents-as-thus. According to these interpreters, the false idea is to be equated with the confused and obscure idea – where the latter, in turn, is an idea whose representational content is so murky, that one does not know *what* (or on some versions, *how*) the idea represents.

As seen in Chapter 2, Wells is one advocate of this reading of Cartesian material falsity. On Wells's view, when an idea is confused and obscure, one does not know whether the idea represents a true or false object. Such an idea is (materially) false. Thus, Wells sees confusion and obscurity is a (necessary and) sufficient condition for material falsity: all confused and obscure ideas are false. This is in contrast to the view presented above, wherein an idea that is (materially) false must of necessity be confused and obscure (in other words, not clear and distinct), but not all confused and obscure ideas are false. Only those that wrongly represent-as-thus are.

Another interesting version of the position that false ideas are to be identified with obscure ones is found in (the latter half of) Bolton's reading. Bolton, like Wells, accepts that a Cartesian idea represents truly whatever it represents (Bolton 1986: 395). For Bolton, a false idea (in both the 'broad' and 'narrow' senses) is such that 'when taken alone, its representational content is merely obscure'. This obscurity enables the thinker to view the idea 'in the context of false assumptions about its manner of representation'. When this happens, the idea 'seems to exhibit what it does not' (Bolton 1986: 396).

Anthony Kenny has helpfully pointed out that Descartes saw his ideas as being akin in significant ways to mental pictures, and Kenny himself elucidates the nature of representation in Cartesian ideas by comparing it to representation in pictures or paintings. (For instance, he asks under what conditions we would consider a picture to be a picture of Napoleon, and links this to the question of the conditions under which Descartes would consider a given idea to be an idea of X (Kenny 1968: 120). Bolton's characterization here invites a similar comparison between the false idea and the obscure picture. The false idea could be compared to, say, an abstract expressionist painting by Willem de Kooning. The object represented in such a work is not evident to the viewer who first sees it, because the manner or device by which the work represents its object is not evident. Thus the viewer who makes a mistake about the nature of the representing relation between picture and object will make a mistake about what is really being exhibited by the picture. Similarly, the object of the false (representationally obscure) idea is not initially self-evident to the thinker, because the manner or device by which the idea represents its object is not evident. The viewer who makes a mistake about the nature of the representing relation between the idea and its object will make a mistake about what the idea exhibits. (In contrast, the clear and distinct idea would presumably be such that it evidently exhibits the manner by which it represents its object, so that the thinker cannot make a mistake about this object.)

A key difference between the readings of Bolton and Wells, and the reading I have adopted, lies in the relation of the materially false idea to the formally false judgement. On their views, the false idea is one whose content is obscure and indeterminate, but is not in itself *misleading*. Rather, the idea is such that the thinker is wholly at sea about what it portrays. (One does not know whether it represents a true or false object; or again, one does not know the means by which the idea represents its object, and hence does not recognize its object.) Because of the obscurity of the idea, it is the *thinker* who then judges wrongly about the object of the idea. Thus, Wells writes that when our ideas are confused and obscure, 'our judgements are at risk because . . . we are in the presence of *materia errandi*' (Wells 1984: 37). Similarly, Bolton points out that 'due to its obscurity, the idea gives us opportunity to *judge* its object in the context of ill-considered assumptions' (Bolton 1986: 396, emphasis mine).

In contrast, my reading accepts that the false idea represents wrongly to the thinker and in doing so, misleads the thinker into making a false judgement. Vere Chappell maintains that for Descartes:

> Representation is . . . a three-termed relation with the thinker as one of its terms . . . The mind, or myself, Descartes says, is what the objects of my

> thought are represented to. My ideas serve to represent things, but they represent them to *me*.
>
> (Chappell 1986: 191)

On my reading, false ideas preserve this three-termed relation, insofar as my false ideas do still represent-as-thus (albeit wrongly) to the thinker, thus providing material for my false judgements. In contrast, the false idea according to Wells's or Bolton's (latter) view is unlike the true idea in that it does not 'serve to represent' to the thinker in any way at all – in the absence of specific representational content, it is the *thinker* who then takes the idea to represent something it does not.

Views such as Wells's and Bolton's apparently derive strong textual support from the Fourth Set of Replies, where Descartes makes claims to the effect that the idea of cold is 'materially false' because, 'owing to the fact that it is obscure and confused, I am unable to judge whether or not what it represents . . . exists outside my sensation' (AT 7: 234, CSM 2: 164). However, the textual support from the Fourth Set of Replies for such positions is more apparent than real.

To begin with, note that there are various passages in the Fourth Set of Replies in which Descartes clearly indicates that a false idea is one that specifically represents-as-thus. Consider for instance this passage:

> Yet ideas which give the judgement little or no scope for error do not seem as much entitled to be called materially false as those which give great scope for error. . . . Confused ideas which are made up at will by the mind, such as the ideas of false gods, do not provide as much scope for error as the confused ideas arriving from the senses . . . (*if it is true, as I have said, that these ideas do not represent anything real*).
>
> (AT 7: 234, CSM 2: 163, emphasis mine)

In this passage, the false ideas of colour and cold would only provide opportunity or scope for error if it is true that they turn out not to represent anything real. This suggests that these ideas do actually represent colour and cold as real (and would thus be false if colour and cold aren't real). Thus, this passage suggests that false ideas do have a specific representational content – that is, they are representings-as-thus. Again, consider this passage:

> Thus, whether cold is a positive thing or a privation does not affect the idea I have of it, which remains the same as it always was. It is this idea which, I claim, can provide material for error *if it is true that cold is a privation and does not have as much reality as heat*.
>
> (AT 7: 233, CSM 2: 163, emphasis mine) *

This passage indicates that the idea of cold (usually) represents cold as having reality. Thus, it would be false (provide material for error) if it turned out that cold was actually a privation. It is evident that Descartes thinks that the idea of cold does indeed represent-as.[21]

In reply to this, it might be countered that, while the above fragments suggest that false ideas do represent-as, there are other passages in the Fourth Set of Replies that suggest ideas are false insofar as their content is so obscure that one does not know what (or how) they represent. For example, there is the passage mentioned earlier:

> [M]y only reason for calling the idea [of cold] 'materially false' is that, owing to the fact that it is obscure and confused, I am unable to judge whether or not what it represents to me is something positive which exists outside of my sensation.
>
> (AT 7: 234, CSM 2: 164)

and again:

> [I]f I consider the ideas of cold and heat just as I received them from my senses, I am unable to tell that one idea represents more reality to me than the other.
>
> (AT 7: 232, CSM 2: 163)

These passages apparently support readings such as Wells's and Bolton's, since they indicate that the idea of cold is false insofar as its content is indeterminate, allowing the judgement to decide (at random) whether it represents something positive or not.

However, the above passages *can* be accommodated within the reading that Descartes sees false ideas as having a specific content. To see that this is so, we may begin obliquely by looking at what Descartes had written in the Third Meditation:

> [T]he ideas which I have of heat and cold contain so little clarity and distinctness that they do not enable me to tell whether cold is the privation of heat or vice versa, or whether both of them are real qualities, or neither is. And since there can be no ideas which are not as-if of things, if it is true that cold is nothing but the privation of heat, the idea which represents it to me as something real and positive deserves to be called false . . .
>
> (AT 7: 44, CSM 2: 30)*

Here, Descartes's idea of cold does actually represent cold as positive (which in this Third Meditation context means, cold as a thing with objective being). Nevertheless, there is still a difference between this idea of cold, and that, say, of a triangle. Whereas the immutable certainty about the properties of a triangle ensures that the triangle is a possible existent and thus a 'real' thing, Descartes does not have that certainty about cold. So Descartes's idea of cold here does actually represent cold as being a certain way (that is, as real). Nevertheless, he is still 'unable to tell' (in other words, to have any certainty) what the idea actually represents.

There is no reason why Descartes could not be seen as maintaining something along similar lines in the Fourth Set of Replies. That is to say, Descartes's statement that 'owing to the fact that it is obscure and confused, I am unable to judge whether

or not what [my idea of cold] represents to me is something positive which exists outside of my sensation' – and other similar passages – should not be read as an assertion that his idea of cold does not have a specific representational content. Rather, when he maintains that he is 'unable to tell' or 'unable to judge' what the false idea of cold really represents, he means that he is unable to affirm with certainty (the sort of certainty that he has with clear and distinct ideas) what his idea of cold represents. As other passages in the Fourth Set of Replies make clear, his idea of cold does present itself as representing something real (which in this context means that the idea of cold purports to represent an existing cause). However, because the idea is confused and obscure, not clear and distinct, he is unable to judge with certainty that it does actually represent 'something positive' in the external world (or conversely, that it doesn't).

Admittedly, Descartes does emphasize more strongly the obscurity of false ideas here than he does in TMD, and he also highlights the role that such obscurity plays in generating false judgements and error. But such emphases do not imply that Descartes held the view that false ideas are to be *equated* with obscure ones – or again, that obscure ideas are to be *defined* as ideas with wholly indeterminate representational content. As argued, Descartes can be read in the Fourth Set of Replies as claiming that an obscure idea is one that represents-as-thus, but is not known for certain to represent-as-thus accurately. Such an obscure idea *could* turn out to represent truly, but it may also turn out to represent falsely, and thus to provide material for false judgement. Seen this way, the position on both material falsity and confusion and obscurity in the Fourth Set of Replies is in line with that outlined in TMD. It is also consonant in important ways with Suárez's account of material falsity in DM 9, 2: 4.

But why does Descartes emphasize so strongly in the Fourth Set of Replies that the false idea is one that is confused and obscure? This reason for this emphasis on confusion and obscurity becomes evident if we look at the Fourth Set of Replies as a response to Arnauld's earlier objections.

Descartes was anxious to refute Arnauld's arguments in the Fourth Set of Objections. Arnauld had argued that there is no scope for material falsity in ideas, as an idea always truly represents its object. Thus, there can only be formal falsity, which comes about in judgements. In his reply, Descartes wants to stress that there *is* indeed room for material falsity in ideas, *provided that it is recognized that ideas can be confused and obscure*, *and hence not known to represent truly*. Departing from Arnauld, who held it to be self-evident that an idea truly represents its object, Descartes holds that it is evident[22] that an idea truly represents its object *only* when the idea is clear and distinct. When an idea is confused and obscure, it is not evident whether it represents accurately its object, and it is under these conditions that the thinker may be misled into false judgements. Descartes thus contrasts his account with Arnauld's in the Fourth Set of Objections. In the latter, the means by which the false judgement arises from a truly representative idea is not quite evident. Descartes stresses here that his own position is this: that it is when an idea is confused and obscure that it can be false, and hence provide 'opportunity for error'.

Descartes's emphasis in the Fourth Set of Replies on confusion and obscurity in relation to material falsity should thus not be taken to mark a substantive shift from his Third Meditation portrayal of a false idea as one that falsely represents-as. Rather, Descartes's claim is that it is only when an idea is confused and obscure that there is scope for it to be false, and so provide 'material for false judgements' by misleading the thinker.

Given the foregoing account, we are now in a position to elucidate Descartes's account in the Fourth Set of Replies of the different ways in which we can look at ideas:

> When M. Arnauld says that 'if cold is merely a privation, there cannot be an idea of cold which represents it as a positive thing' . . . he is dealing solely with an idea taken in the *formal* sense. Since ideas are forms of a kind . . . when we think of them as representing something we are taking them . . . *formally*. If, however, we were considering them . . . simply as operations of the intellect, then [we are] taking them materially, but in that case they would have no reference to the truth or falsity of their objects. So I think that the only sense in which an idea [is] materially false is [this]. [Whether] cold is a positive thing or a privation does not affect the idea of it, which remains the same as it always was. It is this idea which . . . can provide material for error if it is . . . true that cold is a privation and does not have as much reality as heat.
>
> (AT 7: 232, CSM 2: 162–3)*

It was mentioned in Chapter 1 that this passage might be read as a (muddled) reversal of the views expressed in TMD. I argue now that it is not.

In this passage, Descartes is discussing ideas$_m$ (that is, ideas that are representers of objects). He first states that Arnauld is taking ideas *formally* when he points out that an idea can never represent its object as other than it is. Given Arnauld's position that an idea of *N* must represent *N* as it is, we can conclude that an idea taken formally is one that represents whatever content it presents to the mind. If the idea represents whatever it presents, it would always represent accurately (for instance, if my idea of cold presents a positive thing, then it also represents that positive thing which is presented to me). The idea can thus never falsely represent. Again, when we take ideas *materially*, we are considering them as formally real modes in the thinker's mind. In such as a case, we would not be concerned with issues of truth and falsity. Finally, when we are talking about ideas that are *materially false*, we have to make a distinction between the content of the idea of cold (which 'remains the same as it always was' in representing cold as a positive thing), and the way things really are (actual cold may be either a positive thing or a privation). The idea of cold (which represents cold as positive) can then provide material for error 'if it is true that cold is a privation'. This passage is thus quite consistent with Descartes's position in the rest of the discussion of material falsity in the Fourth Set of Replies.

Material Falsity and the Sixth Set of Replies

Among the views discussed in Chapter 2, Wilson and Wells obviously accept the view that Cartesian ideas may represent *either* concretely existing objects or what we might

call 'intramental' objects (that is to say, objects that do not have concrete existence). The reading I have offered above agrees with them on this matter, to the extent that it maintains that Cartesian ideas represent 'real' things in the Third Meditation, and existing things in later Meditations, as well as the Fourth Set of Replies.

There is, however, another position that has been held with respect to the objects represented by Cartesian ideas. On this view,[23] the Cartesian $idea_m$ can only represent objectively, and not existentially. That is, an $idea_m$ can only directly represent what is objectively in the intellect, and not what exists outside it. How then do such ideas relate to existing objects? On this view, Descartes follows his late-Scholastic predecessors in holding that ideas can only be related to the realm of existing things through an intervening act of *judgement*. Thus, my $idea_m$ of the sun represents (or purports to represent) the sun that has objective being in my intellect, and I then *judge* that this sun actually exists outside of me.[24]

If this reading of Descartes is correct, then my earlier claims in this chapter must have been drastically mistaken. I argued that, although $ideas_m$ do not represent concretely existing things at the point of the Third Meditation, they come to represent such things in the later meditations and in the Fourth Set of Replies. But if Cartesian ideas can never directly represent existing objects, this must be wrong.

I now argue that Descartes did in fact hold that ideas can represent existing objects. To establish this, we take a closer look at Descartes's account of the three grades of sensory response in the Sixth Replies, as well as his views on judgement.

Descartes on the three grades of sensory response

A prominent part of Descartes's project was to establish conclusively that colours, tastes, smells, hot and cold do not exist as properties of existing matter – that they are merely sensations in the mind (albeit caused by matter). The Sixth Replies contains Descartes's well-known and much discussed account of the relation of these sensations to bodily occurrences, as well as their role in bringing about what we would normally call 'sensory perceptions' – that is, perceptions of coloured and shaped sticks, cups, and trees. If Descartes is to have a coherent position on the status of sensations, his account of the false ideas of cold, heat and so on in the *Meditations* and the Fourth Set of Replies must be able to fit in cogently with the account given in the Sixth Set of Replies.

In the latter, Descartes writes as follows of the three grades of sensory response:

> The first (grade) is limited to the immediate stimulation of the bodily organs by external objects . . . The second grade comprises all the immediate effects produced in the mind as a result of its being united with a bodily organ which is affected in this way. Such effects include the perceptions of pain, pleasure, thirst, hunger, colours, sound, taste, smell, heat, cold and the like . . . The third grade includes all the judgements about things outside us which we have been accustomed to make from our earliest years – judgements which are occasioned by the movements of these bodily organs.
>
> (AT 7: 437, CSM 2: 294–5)

Let us consider first the suggestion that the false ideas of heat and cold belong to the second grade of sensory response. The second grade evidently comprises sensations, strictly taken: Descartes maintains that this grade 'comprises all the *immediate* effects produced by the mind as a result of its being united with a bodily organ' (emphasis mine), and includes among these immediate effects the perceptions of 'colour, sound, taste, smell, heat, cold and the like'. If we locate the idea of cold in the second grade, we would claim that the idea of cold is the sensation of cold.

However, such a claim is implausible for the following reasons. First, as argued earlier, it is evident from the Fourth Set of Replies that the false ideas of heat and cold are not the sensations of heat and cold themselves. Descartes carefully states in the Fourth Set of Replies that the 'idea of cold' is 'the idea *of* the sensation of cold'. Similarly, he also carefully specifies that the idea of thirst '*arises from* the sensations of appetite' (AT 7: 234–35, CSM 2: 164, emphasis mine). Again, Descartes points out that the idea of cold has the sensation of cold as 'its underlying subject', clearly indicating that the false idea of cold is not to be *identified* with the sensation itself (AT 7: 234, CSM 2: 164).

Second, there is textual evidence elsewhere that Descartes does not hold sensations themselves to be representational. For example, in *Principles* 1: 71, 'Descartes says flatly that sensations of tastes, smells, sounds, heat, cold, light, colours and the like "do not represent anything located outside thought"' (Simmons 1999: 348).

Finally, if we wish to see the sensation of cold as the false idea of cold, we must accept that the sensation of cold is also confused and obscure. (On any reasonable reading of material falsity, confusion and obscurity must be either a necessary condition or the sole determinant of material falsity in ideas). Descartes, however, makes evident in the *Principles* that sensations such as cold may be clearly and distinctly perceived, 'provided we take great care . . . to include no more than what is strictly contained in our perceptions – no more than that of which we have inner awareness' (AT 8A: 32, CSM 1: 216). That is, if the thinker takes care to separate the actual sensation of cold itself from the usual accompanying 'obscure judgement' that the cold being sensed has a location in matter, she in fact achieves a clear and distinct perception of the sensation of cold. Given Descartes's claims in the *Principles*, it is clear that the sensation taken strictly in itself is thus not confused or obscure – such confusion and obscurity lies in the usual accompanying judgement, and the failure of the thinker to separate this judgement from the sensation itself.

Alanen is thus right when she argues that the false ideas of cold cannot be located in the second grade of sensory response. She herself maintains that false ideas are 'unanalysed, confused, complex sensory ideas' that involve 'unnoticed or unconscious judgements', and that they are located in the third grade of sensory response (Alanen 1994: 244). In the Sixth Set of Replies, Descartes explains the stages by which we come to arrive at a perception of a stick 'located outside us':

> When I see a stick . . . rays of light are reflected off the stick [towards the eye] and set up certain movements in the optic nerve, and via the optic nerve, in the brain. . . . This movement in the brain . . . is the first grade of sensory response. This leads to the second grade, which extends to the mere perception of colour

> and light reflected from the stick. . . . But *suppose that, as a result of being affected by this sensation of colour, I judge that a stick located outside me, is coloured; and suppose that, on the basis of the extension of the colour and its boundaries together with its position in relation to the parts of the brain, I make a rational calculation about the size, shape and distance of the stick*: although such reasoning is commonly assigned to the senses (which is why I have referred it to the third grade of sensory response), it . . . depends solely on the intellect.
>
> (AT 7: 438, CSM 2: 295, emphasis mine)

In this passage, Descartes claims that it is in the third grade of sensory response that he makes a judgement that there is an existing stick of certain size, shape and distance, on the basis of the sensations of colour in the second grade of sensory response. By parity, it must be in the third grade of sensory response that we come to perceive cold as an existing property of matter. That is, it is in the third grade that we make the obscure judgement, based on the sensation of cold, that cold is a property of matter.

In the Fourth Set of Replies, Descartes characterized the false idea of cold as one that represents cold as 'some [property] called "cold" which is located outside me' (AT 7: 235, CSM 2: 164). Again, as we saw earlier, Descartes accepts that the content of this false idea of cold can be stated propositionally – say, as the proposition that 'cold is an object located outside me'. The Fourth Set of Replies false $idea_m$ of cold can thus be equated with the obscure judgement (based on the sensation of cold) that represents cold to be a property of matter.

If this is correct, then my position that Cartesian ideas can represent (or purport to represent) actual and existing objects is consistent with the account in the Sixth Set of Replies. The false idea of cold that represents cold as an *existing* property of matter is precisely the obscure judgement in the third grade that cold is such an existing property.[25]

In contrast, the proponent of the position that the Cartesian $idea_m$ can never directly represent existing things is faced with a serious difficulty with respect to the account in the Sixth Set of Replies. According to this account, the $idea_m$ of cold relates to the realm of existing things via a two-stage process:

1. the $idea_m$ of cold represents (or purports to represent) cold which has objective being in the intellect.
2. the thinker then judges this cold to correspond to an existing property of matter.

This position faces the following difficulty: at which grade of sensory response does stage (1) occur? It cannot occur in the second grade of sensory response. Descartes makes clear that this grade is comprised by sensations strictly taken. Such sensations (as the *Principles* make clear) have no representational purport, since they are merely 'that of which we have inner awareness'. In contrast, the $ideas_m$ mentioned in stage (1) are *representers* (of things objectively in the intellect). Moreover, as mentioned, Descartes maintains that the $idea_m$ of cold is the idea of the sensation

of cold, so it cannot be located in the second grade, which comprises the sensations themselves.

Neither does stage (1) occur in the third grade of sensory response. In his stick example, Descartes makes clear that the judgement that there is a certain size and shape results *directly* from his being affected by the sensations of the second grade. By parity, the judgement that cold exists as a property of matter would result directly from being affected by the sensation of cold. There is thus no room for the relatively complex two-step process outlined above to take place in the third grade of sensory response. That is, the third grade of sensory response does not accommodate the process in which the $idea_m$ of cold *first* represents cold as a thing with objective being (that is, as a possible existent), whereupon the thinker *then* goes on to judge that this thing 'cold' exists in matter.

In contrast, if one accepts that ideas can represent existing objects, this would fit in nicely with the account in the Sixth Set of Replies. The false idea of cold that represents cold as an existing property is, when stated propositionally, the obscure third-grade judgement that cold exists as a property of matter.

However, there is apparently a fatal objection to the line I have taken (that the false idea of cold is the obscure third-grade judgement that cold exists as a property of matter). If the false idea of cold is in effect an obscure *judgement* by the thinker, what becomes of Descartes's claim that formal falsity is to be ascribed to judgements, whereas material falsity is to be ascribed to ideas? If the false idea of cold is a judgement, then it must also be formally false at the same time. But Descartes specifically states that materially false ideas provide material for false judgements: they are *not* the false judgements themselves. The position I have taken seems to have the unpalatable result of making Descartes guilty of a fundamental inconsistency. To deal with this objection, we now revisit the Cartesian account of judgement.

Descartes's two species of judgement

Cartesian judgement has been characterized by commentators as having a variety of roles. For instance, Kenny offers the following account:

> Judgement differs from perception in being an act of the will [and] in being concerned with extramental reality . . .
>
> (Kenny 1968: 123)

According to Kenny, Cartesian judgement is both the act of affirmation or denial by the will, as well as that by which propositions relating to extramental reality (existing things) are formed.

As Menn indicates, Descartes's Scholastic predecessors would generally have thought it cogent to claim that judgement is the single mental operation by which we both affirm or deny, as well as form propositions relating to the realm of existing things. Descartes is often held to have followed them in adopting this position. I shall argue that he did not do so.

As shown earlier, Descartes's views on material falsity in ideas – and correspondingly, his views on formal falsity in judgements – were strongly influenced by, and closely resemble, Suárez's views. Suárez himself holds that the forming of existential propositions is distinct from affirmation or denial, and that the former can certainly occur without the latter. As mentioned, he maintains in DM 8, 4: 5 that one can express the existential conjunction 'Stars are born', and yet not affirm (or deny) it because one lacks the requisite information.

Descartes, developing on Suárez's position, accepts that the thinker's having an idea$_m$ and her affirmation or denial of that idea (propositionally stated) are separate operations. Some of the ideas$_m$ that a thinker has are ideas$_m$ of *existing* things. Thus, Descartes would evidently accept that the thinker can form propositions relating to existing things – many such propositions would precisely be ideas$_m$ of existing things (stated propositionally). Insofar as the forming of an existential proposition is the forming of an idea$_m$ about existing things, it is clearly a different operation from affirmation and denial of the content of that proposition.

Let us bring this to bear on Descartes's account in the Sixth Set of Replies. When he writes there that he judges (on the basis of his sensations) that a stick located outside him exists, he is not *affirming* that a stick exists (or denying that a stick does not exist). In making such a 'judgement', Descartes is rather forming an idea$_m$ of an existing stick – he is forming an existential proposition to the effect that 'a stick exists outside me'. The having of this idea (and hence the making of this 'judgement') is a separate mental operation from the *affirmation (or denial) that it is true* that there is such an existing stick.

If this is right, then when Descartes uses the terms 'judgement' (and its cognates) with respect to the third grade of sensory response, he is using them *in a different sense* than when he uses the terms to denominate acts of affirmation or denial. Evidence that this is the case can be found by contrasting the accounts of judgement in the Fourth Meditation and the Sixth Set of Replies.

Note first that Descartes makes clear in the Fourth Meditation that judgements *qua* affirmation or denial are acts of the will, and not of the intellect. In contrast, he claims in the Sixth Set of Replies that the judgement concerning the stick in the third grade of sensory response 'depends solely on the *intellect*'. That these two kinds of judgements occur in different faculties clearly indicates that they are different operations.

In the Sixth Set of Replies, Descartes also compares newly formed judgements in the third grade with the habitual judgements that have been made since our earliest years:

> [W]hen we now make a judgement for the first time because of some new observation . . . *we attribute it to the intellect*; but when from our earlier years we have made judgements . . . about the things which affect our senses, then, even though these judgements were made in exactly the same way as those we make now, we refer them to the senses.
>
> (AT 7: 438, CSM 2: 295 emphasis mine)

When newly formed, the judgements in the third grade are (correctly) attributed to the intellect, whereas longstanding judgements are (incorrectly) attributed to the

senses. In both cases, such judgements involve inferences and calculations by the intellect made on the basis of sensory input. But we were wont to describe the long-standing judgements as 'sensory perceptions', since the inferences and calculations occurred at such great speed that we did not notice them. However, such judgements are always accomplished by the intellect.

In the Fourth Meditation, Descartes claims that error comes about when the will carelessly affirms or denies on the basis of perceptions of the intellect that are not clear and distinct. For Descartes, the perceptions of the finite intellect, and the judgements of the infinite will, are clearly separate mental operations. Given that the 'judgements' in the third grade of sensory response are accomplished by the intellect, they are plausibly to be seen as belonging in the class of perceptions of the finite intellect (though they are, unlike perception of 'pure' intellect, derived from or based on sensations of the second grade). Such judgements in the intellect are then not judgements proper, which involve affirmation or denial by the will, but what might be called judgements in the looser sense, or what I shall call quasi-judgements. I shall, for brevity, call the judgement proper a judgement$_p$ and a quasi-judgement a judgement$_q$. That is, I will mean by judgement$_p$ an act of affirmation or denial by the will;[26] and by judgement$_q$ the intellectual 'judgement' that occurs in the third grade of sensory response.

The *Principles* provides further evidence that Descartes used the term 'judgement' (and its cognates) in these two different senses. In that work, he evidently uses the term sometimes to apply to judgement$_p$ and sometimes to judgement$_q$, depending on the context. For instance, in his discussion of the respective roles played by human intellect and will in bringing about human error (*Principles* 1: 29–39), Descartes clearly uses the term 'judge' and its cognates to mean judge$_p$. For instance, see *Principles* 1: 33:

> 33. We fall into error only when we make judgements about things which we have not sufficiently perceived.
>
> Now when we perceive something, so long as we do not make any affirmation [*affirmemus*] or denial about it, we clearly avoid error. And we equally avoid error when we confine our affirmations and denials to what we clearly and distinctly perceive should be affirmed or denied. Error arises only when, as often happens, we make a judgement about something even though we do not have an accurate perception of it.*

Here, Descartes evidently uses judgement in the last sentence to mean affirmation and denial. Error (the making of false judgements) is to be avoided by not making judgements (affirmations and denials) when we do not have a clear and distinct perception.

On the other hand, in his discussion of pain and colour a little further on, Descartes uses 'judge' and its cognates generally to mean judge$_q$. For example, consider this passage:

> [A]ll of us have, from our early childhood, judged whatever we have sensed to exist outside of our minds and to closely resemble our sensations . . . Thus, on

> seeing a colour . . . we supposed we were seeing a thing located outside us which closely resembled the [sensation] of colour that we experience within us at the time. And this was something that, because of our habit of making such judgements, we thought we saw clearly and distinctly – so much so that we took it for something certain and indubitable.
>
> (AT 8A: 32, CSM 1: 216)*

Descartes points out here that all of us have from early childhood made habitual judgements that there exists outside us an existing property called 'colour', which closely resembles the sensation of colour that we experience. And when we made such judgements, '*we thought we saw clearly and distinctly*'. Evidently, then, through making such judgements, we ended up with a perception (of colour as a property of bodily objects) that we *thought* was clear and distinct, but which wasn't clear and distinct. The habitual judgements of colour as existing outside of us thus formed a perception (which turned out not to be clear and distinct). Here, the habitual 'judgements' are evidently judgements$_q$, not judgements$_p$: the latter would be the affirmation or denial of the perception formed through habitual judgements$_q$.

Again, consider this passage, slightly further on:

> In later years the mind is no longer a total slave to the body, and does not refer everything to it. Indeed, it . . . discovers very many of its previous judgements to be false. But despite this*, it is not easy for the mind to erase these false judgements from its memory; and as long as they stick there, they can cause a variety of errors*.
>
> (AT 8A: 36, CSM 1: 219–20, emphasis mine)

In this passage too, Descartes is using 'judgements' to mean judgements$_q$. In particular, he is talking about those habitual judgements$_q$ in which we take colour, cold and so on to be existing properties that resemble our felt sensations of colour and cold. Significantly, he states that it is 'not easy to erase these false judgements from [the mind's] memory, and as long as they stick there, they can *cause* a variety of errors'. For Descartes, the false judgements that linger in the memory are *not* themselves errors (as one might expect him to claim if the judgements in question are judgements$_p$). Instead, they can *cause* a variety of errors if not erased – presumably because their presence might tempt us to affirm them (that is, to make a false judgement$_p$ on their basis).

Thus, although Descartes does not explicitly distinguish between judgements$_p$ and judgements$_q$, there is ample evidence that he sometimes uses the word 'judgement' to mean one, and sometimes the other. That he moves somewhat carelessly between these two usages is not altogether surprising. As mentioned, Descartes imbibed a tradition in which judgements were often held to encompass both the act of affirmation or denial by the will, as well as the formulation of propositions relating to existing things. He himself (following Suárez) held the two to be separate and distinct from each other. But in his own use of the term 'judgement', he continued, in an approximate fashion, to apply the term to both types of operations – that is, he used it sometimes to designate affirmation or denial, and

sometimes to designate judgements$_q$ (that is, ideas$_m$ formed in the third grade of sensory response), where these by and large[27] pertain to existing objects.

We can now go back to the charge of inconsistency that I raised at the end of the last section. Given the distinction between judgements$_p$ and judgements$_q$, it is evident that the false idea of cold (stated propositionally) is a judgement$_q$ by the intellect. However, this judgement$_q$ is not formally true or false. Formal truth and falsity pertain to judgements$_p$, which are affirmations and denials effected by the will. There is thus no inconsistency in claiming that the materially false idea of cold (which is a judgement$_q$) provides material for false judgements$_p$.

The idea$_m$ of cold revisited

There is one remaining issue to be dealt with in respect of Descartes's discussion of material falsity in the Fourth Set of Replies. This relates to the notorious passage (hereafter Passage A) given below:

> But my critic asks what the idea of cold, which I described as materially false, represents to me. If it represents a privation, he says, it is true; and if it represents a positive entity, it is not the idea of cold. This is right . . .
>
> (AT 7: 234, CSM 2: 164)

At first sight, Descartes's claims contradict my position on false ideas in the Fourth Set of Replies (where ACP is in operation). As Wilson points out, this passage seems to endorse the position that an idea of *N* cannot represent *N* as other than it is. It thus seems to contradict my claim that a false idea under ACP can represent its object (that is, its existing cause) as other than it is really is.

Note also that Descartes's claims in Passage A seem to contradict the rest of his claims in the Fourth Set of Replies. Descartes writes there that the idea of cold is the idea of the sensation of cold. He also states that the sensation underlying this idea is a 'positive entity' (AT 7: 234, CSM 2: 164). Thus, Descartes is apparently committed to the claim that the idea of cold, insofar as it is the idea of the sensation of cold, is in fact an idea of a positive entity (the sensation itself). How then can Descartes claim, as he does in Passage A, that if the idea of cold represents a positive entity, it is not the idea of cold? After all, the idea of cold does represent the positive sensation itself (although it may not accurately do so).

The resolution of these difficulties is admittedly not easy. However, I believe it lies, in the first instance, in recognizing that in ACP, an idea represents (or purports to represent) its existing *cause*. For Descartes, the idea of the stick in the Sixth Set of Replies represents (or purports to represent) that stick, located outside the thinker, which 'immits' into her this idea; the idea of God purports to represent God, located outside the thinker, who 'immits' into her (albeit by very different means)[28] this idea. However, Descartes apparently thinks that, while the sensation of cold is the underlying basis of the idea of cold, it is not the cause of the idea of cold (in the way that God and the stick are the respective causes of the idea of God and the idea of the stick).

To see why he holds this, we might compare the idea of 'sensory' cold with the idea of 'sensory' shape. According to Descartes, both ideas are caused by the following chain: specific features of matter external to the body result in changes in the body of the thinker, which culminate in movements in the pineal gland that in turn cause certain sensations in the thinker. (Note that Descartes's physiology is outdated: neurological studies have now shown that the pineal gland does not in fact play the role that Descartes ascribes it. In this and subsequent discussions, I shall not take into account advances in physiology and physics made since Descartes's time. Instead, I will simply focus on elucidating how Descartes's own views about physics and physiology affect his philosophical position, and vice versa.) On the basis of these sensations, the thinker then forms ideas_{m} of shape and of coldness. Now Descartes would maintain that the sensations in the second grade from which we form the idea_{m} of a particular shape are not the cause of the shape. Rather, the cause represented by this idea of shape is what we would call its distal cause – the shape in the physical world that brings about the idea. In that case, the cause of the idea of cold must by parity be the distal cause of that idea – the distal set of physical modes that brings about the idea of cold. Thus, the sensation of cold is not the *cause* of cold. The false idea of cold may have the sensation as its underlying subject. However, it purports to represent, not this sensation, but the external distal cause which gives rise to this sensation (just as the idea of shape purports to represent the external shape that gives rise to the sensations on the basis of which I form my idea_{m} of shape).

Under ACP, then, the idea of cold thus does not represent (or purport to represent) the sensation that is its underlying subject, but rather the external distal cause that gives rise to this sensation. However, this still does not fully explain why Descartes maintains in Passage A that the idea of cold is true if it represents a privation or absence. For one might argue that the idea of cold surely does have an external distal cause – the modes of matter that are the distal cause of the sensation of cold (and hence of the third-grade idea_{m} of cold) in the thinker. In that case, we might say that the idea of cold represents *wrongly* this existing cause, in representing the cause of cold as resembling cold itself. But we certainly cannot claim, as Descartes does in Passage A, that the idea of cold represents a privation or absence – that is, it does not represent an existing cause.

However, there may still be a plausible case to be made as to why Descartes might think the idea of cold in fact does not represent an existing cause. To see how this might be, let us suppose that there is a square slab of ice. Now suppose Jane has an idea of a particular shape in relation to this slab of ice. Whether her idea is (materially) true or false would depend on whether it accurately portrays the shape of the slab. If she has an idea of squareness (of an appropriate size), her idea accurately represents the slab of ice and is true. If she has an idea of rectangularity, her idea does not accurately represent the slab, and is false. One can thus determine the material truth/falsity of the idea by reference to its external distal cause.

It is not evident that a similar procedure is available for ideas such as the idea of cold. To see why, we may begin with an example borrowed from Locke and

Berkeley, and slightly modified. Suppose that there are two dishwashers, Tom and Jack, one of whom has just immersed his hands in very hot water while the other has immersed his in very cold water. In this situation, the same modes of matter in a slab of ice might give rise to different sensations, if Tom and Jack were to touch it – one an extreme cold, and the other a mild cold – and hence to two different ideas of cold in them.

Descartes himself acknowledges that in the *Passions of the Soul* that '[t]he soul can prevent itself from hearing a slight noise or feeling a slight pain by attending . . . closely to some other thing' (AT 8A: 363–4, CSM 1: 345). It seems plausible to claim by parity that, when one is attending to some other matter, one may not have an idea of cold when touching the slab of ice, whereas one might have an idea of cold if one is mentally focused on the slab of ice itself. Pushing matters further, humans with different constitutions, or hailing from different climates, may have different ideas of cold (based on sensations of different strengths) upon touching the slab of ice. (This is borne out by the old saw that some people 'feel the cold' less than others.)

The point then is this. Suppose that, as enlightened Cartesians, we accept that our ideas of cold do not resemble the modes of matter that are their distal cause. We recognize instead that an idea of cold can only purport to *correspond* to a particular set of physical modes. Even so, one might ask – which of the various ideas of cold listed above (Tom's, Jack's, that of the person from a different climate and so on) would correspond *correctly* to the distal cause in the slab of ice, and hence be the true idea of that cause? Given the wide variations in human constitutions and environmental conditions, there does not seem to be any one privileged idea that can be said to the *true* idea of cold. The same set of modes of matter can give rise to different sensations, and hence different ideas, of cold. Conversely, an idea of cold-of-a-particular-degree can have very different kinds of material modes as its distal cause. There is no reasonable correspondence between a given idea of cold and any one set of material modes (and vice versa).

In order for an idea to represent (or purport to) an object, there must be available criteria by which one can determine that the idea *succeeds* in representing that object. A failure to meet these criteria would result in a failure to represent (or represent accurately) that object. Thus, Jane's idea of shape can be said to represent its distal cause because there are criteria by which one can determine whether the idea succeeds in representing its distal cause. By parity, in order for an idea of cold to represent (or purport to represent) its existing (distal) cause, there must be criteria by which one can determine whether the idea succeeds in representing *its* distal cause. However, no such criteria for success are available here, for there are any number of mutually incompatible ideas of cold that could arise from the same distal cause, and no means of determining which one successfully 'portrays' (that is, corresponds to) that cause.

This being the case, none of these ideas of cold can be said to *represent* the existing distal cause. These ideas of cold therefore do not represent anything at all. This would explain why Descartes maintains that it is 'true' that the idea of cold represents a privation or absence – for the idea of cold, carefully considered, would

represent nothing! For the same reason, if there is an idea that succeeds in *representing* a 'positive entity' (in the context, an existing cause), then, as Descartes says, it is 'not the idea of cold' (which cannot represent at all). (Again, Descartes's account here of the representational differences between the ideas of size and shape, and those of heat and cold, is based on relatively unsophisticated views of physics and physiology which are mistaken in significant ways that could have a bearing on his argument. But, as mentioned earlier, this book will not take into account the implications of advances in these areas that postdate Descartes.[29])

Conclusion

As mentioned, the papers considered in Chapter 2 provided a 'map' on which I could locate the 'dynamic' reading provided in this chapter. I now end this chapter by locating my reading of false ideas in relation to these readings.

Wells and Bolton hold that a false idea is to be identified with one that is confused and obscure (so that one does not know how or what it represents). I have spent some time in this chapter arguing that Descartes does not hold this (either in the Third Meditation or the Fourth Set of Replies). For Descartes, a false idea is always one which falsely *represents-as*.

Normore and Wilson (in her later paper) both accept that false ideas falsely represent-as. I now briefly look at each of them, in relation to the dynamic reading provided. Normore holds that a false idea is one that has (or contains) no objective reality. I have argued that this is certainly true of the Third Meditation (when AA is in operation). However, given the epistemic advances subsequently effected, it does not hold true of the later portions of the *Meditations* and the Fourth Set of Replies (both of which accept ACP as an account of true representation, and consequently see an idea as representing its existing cause).

Wilson holds that a false idea is one that referentially represents one object, but presentationally represents another. However, her worry about her line of argument is that it leads to a puzzle about what an idea like cold might refer to (or referentially represent). In particular, she has doubts about the position that the idea might refer to its cause. As Descartes accepts that ideas may represent real but not existing things, the position that ideas referentially represent their causes entails (implausibly) that real, non-existing, things could also be causes of ideas.

Wilson's worry is obviated in my account. I have argued that, insofar as an idea represents a real thing (as it does under AA in the Third Meditation), it does not represent its cause. Again, insofar as the idea represents its cause (as it does under ACP), this cause is an existing thing (and not just a 'real' one). This position thus rules out that a 'real thing' need be cast as a cause.

Finally, Bolton notes early in her paper that Descartes initially sees a false idea as one which represents nonentity as positive, but broadens this to include any idea that 'seems to represent something it does not'. My reading generally agrees that the false idea is broadened in the course of the *Meditations* from one that represents no things as things (under AA) to one that may fail in a number of different ways (under ACP). It then offers an explanation for this 'broadening' – namely, that it

occurs because of the changes in Descartes's epistemic status, and the resultant changes in the criteria by which an idea is picked out as false.

Thus, some of the concerns and possible lacunae in the accounts in Chapter 2 can be addressed if one accepts that the changes in Descartes's epistemic status in the *Meditations* lead to changes in his criteria for material falsity in ideas.

4 The Metaphysical Status of Material Falsity (and of Error)

Introduction

The previous chapters showed how an analysis of Cartesian false ideas casts light on important aspects of Cartesian error, such as the features that characterize a false idea, and how such false ideas relate to false judgements and error. Descartes's much discussed views on sensations and their representation were also examined. In this chapter and the next, the focus is on another aspect of the Cartesian account of false ideas – namely, how Descartes's introduction of the notion of material falsity plays a crucial role in furthering the subsequent argument of the *Meditations*.

In her book, Wilson argues that TMD makes no immediate contribution to the subsequent argument of the Third Meditation. Instead, TMD is aimed at introducing (or perhaps sneaking in?) a distinction between primary and secondary qualities, which will be of crucial importance to Descartes's subsequent account of the corporeal world. However, she argues, there are problems with the distinction as it is set up in TMD, and how it relates to the subsequent account of the corporeal world in the Sixth Meditation.

In this chapter, it is first argued that the distinction set up in TMD is cogent and well-defined, and that it plays a much more direct role than is usually thought in establishing the existence and nature of the Cartesian corporeal world. More importantly, Descartes's discussion of false ideas in TMD is shown to introduce an account of the metaphysical status of material falsity in ideas (which will subsequently be found to apply also to formal error in judgements). This metaphysical feature of falsity (and of error) plays a crucial part in the subsequent argument of the Third Meditation – in particular, in the Third Meditation proofs of God's existence.

Wilson on material falsity in the Third Meditation

The importance of attending to the structure of the *Meditations* when attempting to interpret the views Descartes expresses therein has already been emphasized. The *Meditations* is a work in which every discovery of Descartes's is built upon earlier findings, and each new discovery contributes to his further understanding of self, God and the material world. From this perspective, TMD presents a bit of a puzzle:

in precisely what way does the discussion there further the development of Descartes's argument in the *Meditations*?

Wilson gives a succinct presentation of the concerns that arise in this connection. She points out that introducing the notion of material falsity does not obviously contribute to the most important portion of the Third Meditation – namely, the proofs of God's existence:

> [W]e should observe that the notion of material falsity is not *needed* for setting up the argument for God's existence . . . Ostensibly, of course, Descartes introduces the notion that ideas of sense may be materially false, in order to argue that *they* do not provide a basis for concluding to a cause outside himself . . . But actually from this point of view, the notion of material falsity is a red herring. For in the next paragraph Descartes will conclude that his *clear and distinct* ideas of bodies – which he contrasts with those tarred with the brush of material falsity – could *also* have been produced by himself.
>
> (Wilson 1978: 111–12)

If, as mentioned earlier, Descartes's aim in the Third Meditation is to find a route to what lies beyond himself, then introducing the notion of material falsity does not play any useful role. This is because Descartes's ideas of corporeal things, whether or not they are false, do not (at this stage) provide a route to anything beyond himself: Descartes accepts that they could have originated from himself even if they were true. So why bother to mention that some of these ideas might be false?

Not only is TMD an apparently pointless interpolation, but its inclusion also seems to *impede* the (first) argument for God's existence. A false idea in the Third Meditation is one that purports to have objective reality when it does not. That an idea may be false thus implies that the idea does not, as Wilson puts it, wear its objective reality 'on its face':

> With respect to the [argument for] God's existence, the complexity in determining objective reality leads to the following problem. If our ideas can provide 'material for error' concerning that which they represent, and can to this extent be mis-judged with respect to whether they represent *res* or *nullas res*, what justifies our assurance that the idea of God in fact does possess objective reality (and therefore must have an 'infinitely real' cause)?
>
> (Wilson 1978: 112)

The fact that an idea may be false poses a threat to the first proof of God's existence: since an idea may not have objective reality, it is possible that the idea of God may not have objective reality, and thus may not have an existing cause. Hence, there may be no God.

Why then does Descartes introduce the notion of material falsity, when it not only involves him in confusing tangles with Arnauld, but also threatens a key piece of his argument in the *Meditations*? According to Wilson, the main reason for introducing this notion has nothing to do with the proofs of God's existence, which

immediately follow. Instead, TMD is essentially aimed at 'developing the theme of knowledge of body' (Wilson 1978: 113).

What TMD does is to draw the distinction between two classes of ideas: the clear and distinct ideas of shape, size, duration (and the like), and the confused and obscure ideas of light, colours, heat and cold (and the like). That the ideas of size, shape and so on are clear and distinct then paves the way for the eventual argument that there exists a corporeal world that possesses these features. In contrast, the confused and obscure ideas of colour and cold provide no warrant that there exists anything in the corporeal world which resembles or corresponds to them. TMD thus provides the basis for the later institution of the 'true scientific image . . . of the world':

> From the point of view of the *Meditations*, our ability to grasp the crucial difference between the true scientific image and the false commonsense image of the world rests on our acceptance of the proposition that the perceptions of the former are clear and distinct, while those of the latter are obscure and confused.
> (Wilson 1978: 119)

Wilson contends that a 'major failing' of the *Meditations* is that Descartes gives 'so little reason, or compelling basis' for accepting the contrast in TMD between the distinctness of ideas of size and shape and the obscurity of ideas of colour and cold (ibid.). Before we proceed to examine Wilson's grounds for making this contention, it would be helpful to establish that the ideas mentioned in TMD are, as I have indicated in Chapter 3, 'sensory' ideas.

Recall that Descartes accepts that there is a phenomenological distinction between the ideas of intellect, the ideas of imagination, and the ideas of sense. Ideas of the intellect *per se* do not involve images, whereas ideas of the imagination involve images that one 'sees with [the] mind's eye'. Finally, ideas that are 'sensory' present their objects as 'things or modes of things, existing outside thought'. They are also involuntary, and differ from ideas of the imagination in being 'more lively and vivid'.

There are good grounds for holding that the ideas mentioned in TMD are all 'sensory', and present their objects as 'modes of things existing outside thought'. In the Third Meditation, Descartes is concerned to discover if anything exists beyond himself *qua* thinker. Accordingly, he tries to determine, using the Causal Principle, the causes of those ideas that purport to represent existing things – must any of these ideas actually have existing things 'located outside' him as their cause? In the passage just preceding TMD, he lists among such ideas of existing things those 'which variously represent . . . corporeal and inanimate things [and] animals' (AT 7: 43, CSM 2: 29). Clearly, these ideas, which purport to represent *existing* corporeal and inanimate things and animals, must be 'sensory', as neither the ideas of the intellect nor imagination purport to represent corporeal things as things existing outside thought. As the 'ideas of corporeal things' scrutinized in TMD are *precisely* the forementioned ideas of corporeal things, they must also be 'sensory' – that is, they must present their objects as modes of things existing outside thought (ibid.).[1]

Wilson too offers evidence that the ideas in TMD are sensory ideas, by pointing out the care that Descartes takes to link TMD to the wax passage in the Second Meditation (Wilson 1978: 106). He opens the discussion in TMD thus:

> If I scrutinize [my ideas of corporeal things] thoroughly and examine them one by one, *in the way in which I examined the idea of the wax yesterday*, I notice that the things which I perceive clearly and distinctly in them are very few in number. The list comprises size, or extension in length, breadth and depth [etc.].
>
> (AT 7: 43, CSM 2: 29–30, emphasis mine)

The idea of wax in the Second Meditation is an idea of a *particular* piece of wax, and it is evident that Descartes accepts that this idea is 'sensory', and is ostensibly of an existing piece of wax (AT 7: 30, CSM 2: 20). The ideas of corporeal things, scrutinized in the same fashion as the idea of the wax, must also be 'sensory'.

Wilson in her book accepts (as I have) that the ideas mentioned in TMD are 'sensory'. However, she then argues that, given that the ideas of the *primary* qualities (size, shape and so on) in TMD are sensory, it is difficult to make sense of Descartes's claim that they are clear and distinct:[2]

> In the Second Meditation, Descartes has held that the wax is clearly and distinctly perceived as just something extended, flexible and mutable . . .
>
> [But] to say [as Descartes does in the Third Meditation] that we clearly and distinctly perceive *figure* and *motion* in bodies, is obviously different from saying that we perceive them as *flexible* and *mutable* . . . [I]t is important to notice that *Descartes does not really make clear in precisely what sense we distinctly perceive, say, figure in body.* Does he mean to imply that we distinctly perceive that particular figure of a particular body (at a given time)?
>
> (Wilson 1978: 101, 107, emphasis mine)

Wilson maintains that Descartes fails to make clear in what sense one can clearly and distinctly perceive figure in body. One can reasonably accept a claim to the effect that a particular body (such as the piece of wax) is clearly and distinctly perceived to be something flexible and mutable. But it is harder to comprehend, let alone accept, a claim to the effect that shape and movement themselves are clearly and distinctly perceived in corporeal bodies. What does Descartes mean by such a claim? He cannot mean that we can clearly and distinctly perceive the specific shape and movement of particular bodies, for he makes clear in the Sixth Meditation that ideas of the shape and size of particular bodies are confused and obscure, and may turn out to be false (AT 7: 80, CSM 2: 55). But if he does not mean this, what does he mean?

TMD supposedly introduces an important contrast between the clear and distinct ideas of size and shape and the confused and obscure ideas of colour, and cold, which contrast paves the way for Descartes's scientific image of the material world. But if, as Wilson points out, one cannot even *comprehend* what these clear and distinct ideas of size and shape are, Descartes's attempt to draw this important distinction is scuppered from the outset.

Wilson also argues that this so-called distinction does not have any evident phenomenological basis (Wilson 1978: 119). If we consider our ideas of corporeal things, there is no obvious phenomenological distinction between our apprehensions of their size and shape and our apprehensions of their colour and taste, which would support the claim that the former are clear and distinct, and the latter confused and obscure.

For Wilson, Descartes certainly has a *motive* for wanting to draw a distinction between the two sorts of ideas. However, her point is that a major failure of TMD (and of the *Meditations* as a whole) is that he has not provided any *grounds* for drawing the distinction. Indeed, given the opacity of his account of clear and distinct ideas of size and shape in TMD, he has not even shown what the distinction amounts to.

Pace Wilson, however, I argue that Descartes clear and distinct 'sensory' ideas of size and shape are cogently conceived, and that he has good phenomenological grounds for drawing the distinction between these ideas and the confused and obscure ideas of colour and cold in TMD. In what follows, we first examine the proof of the existence of the external world in the *Principles*, and show that such sensory clear and distinct ideas are appealed to in this proof to establish that matter exists. The character and phenomenology of such ideas is explored, and it is shown that these 'sensory' clear and distinct ideas are referred to in TMD. It is then argued that the proof of the existence of the external world in the *Meditations* (often thought to rely on an appeal to natural human inclinations) also relies crucially on these 'sensory' clear and distinct ideas of size and shape. Descartes introduces these ideas in TMD, and later appeals directly to them in the Sixth Meditation to establish the existence of matter. The evident phenomenological distinction between them, and the obscure and confused ideas of cold of TMD ensures that the matter established to exist in the Sixth Meditation has size and shape, but not (or possibly not) cold and colour.

The clear and distinct ideas of TMD and Descartes's proofs of the external world

Descartes offers two different proofs for the existence of the external world – the proof of the external world in the *Principles* (hereafter abbreviated as PEWP) and the proof of the external world in the *Meditations* (hereafter abbreviated as PEWM). The two are generally thought to be different in structure: whereas the former relies on clear and distinct perceptions to establish the existence of matter, the latter apparently appeals to natural inclinations to do the same.

PEWP has received far less attention than PEWM. However, an examination of this proof is crucial for understanding the nature of the clear and distinct 'sensory' ideas mentioned in TMD. I now consider the argument of PEWP.

The proof of the existence of the external world in the Principles

PEWP is found in *Principles* 2: 1. The proof (divided into passages to facilitate discussion) is as follows:

> [Passage A] Now, all our sensations undoubtedly come to us from something that is distinct from our mind. For it is not in our power to make ourselves have one sensation rather than another; this is obviously dependent on the thing that is acting on our senses.
>
> [Passage B] Admittedly, one can raise the question of whether this thing is God or something different from God.
>
> [Passage C] But we have sensory awareness of, or rather as a result of sensory stimulation we have a clear and distinct perception of, some kind of matter, which is extended in length, breadth and depth, and has various differently shaped and variously moving parts which give rise to our various sensations of colours, smells, pain and so on.
>
> [Passage D] And if God were himself immediately producing in our mind the idea of such extended matter, or even if he were causing the idea to be produced by something which lacked extension, shape and motion, there would be no way of avoiding the conclusion that he should be regarded as a deceiver.
>
> [Passage E] For we have a clear understanding of this matter as something that is quite different from God and from ourselves or our mind; and we appear to see clearly that the idea of it comes to us from things located outside ourselves, which it wholly resembles. And we have . . . noted that it is quite inconsistent with the nature of God that he should be a deceiver.
>
> [Passage F] The unavoidable conclusion, then, is that there exists something extended in length, breadth and depth, and possessing all the properties which we clearly perceive to belong to an extended thing.
>
> (AT 8A: 40–1, CSM 1: 223)

In Passages A and B, PEWP opens with an argument that our sense-perceptions are not caused by ourselves, but have an external source, and then goes on to indicate possible external sources ('God or something different from God'). Passages C–F then introduce a set of 'sensory' clear and distinct perceptions that (God having been established to be a non-deceiver) enable us to establish the existence of matter. It is these latter passages that merit further consideration.

Descartes begins Passage C by stating that 'we have sensory awareness of, or rather as a result of sensory stimulation we have a clear and distinct perception of, some kind of matter, which is extended in length, breadth and depth, and has various differently shaped and variously moving parts . . . '. He evidently refers here to a form of clear and distinct perception that is either sensory, or closely associated with the senses, for he begins by claiming that he has some sort of sensory awareness, and then modifies this by stating that it is rather that he has clear and distinct perceptions that are *based* on sensory input. We now look more closely at the 'sensory' or sense-based clear and distinct perceptions he appeals to in Passage C.

Note first that Descartes expresses himself rather loosely when he claims that we have, through the senses, a clear and distinct perception of '*matter* extended in length, breadth and depth'. Commentators point out that it is a fundamental and frequently reiterated tenet of Cartesian epistemology that one does not have perceptions of substances *per se*.[3] Consider this passage from *Principles* 1: 52:

> we cannot . . . become aware of a substance merely through its being an existing thing, since this alone does not have any effect on us . . . [But] if we perceive the presence of some attribute, we can infer that there must also be present an existing thing or substance to which it may be attributed.
>
> (AT 8A: 25, CSM 1: 210)[4]

For Descartes, our perceptions are in the first instance of *properties* of substance, not of substance itself. Thus, a more precise formulation of the claim in Passage C would be this: that we have 'sensory' clear and distinct perceptions of length, breadth, depth, shape and motion, from which we *infer* the presence of a material substance with these properties of size, shape and so on. This inference is the basis on which we form (what I shall call) a derivative idea of extended matter with the properties of size and shape.

Similarly, when Descartes suggests in Passage D that God or non-material (finite) substance may be 'immediately producing in our mind the idea of extended matter', his claim needs to be disambiguated. As what we directly perceive are properties, any idea of extended matter that the thinker has is a result of her *own* inference, given her ideas of size and shape, of a material substance with these properties. Such an idea of extended matter is thus not 'immediately produced' in her by God or non-material substance, or indeed by matter itself. Instead, what Descartes suggests in Passage D is that God or non-material substance may be immediately producing in us those clear and distinct ideas of size and shape, through which we infer the presence of a material substance with these properties, and thus form an idea of extended matter with the properties of size and shape.

Descartes goes on in Passage E to dismiss the possibility that our ideas of size and shape (and the derivative idea of extended matter) could have a cause other than material substance. He argues that God would be a deceiver if something else were the cause of these ideas, as we 'see clearly that the idea of [extended matter] comes to us from things located outside ourselves, which it wholly resembles'. Descartes's claim that we see clearly that the idea of extended matter comes from a wholly resembling extended matter once again requires careful consideration. Note that we can see clearly (that is, be certain) that our ideas of extended matter derive from existing extended matter *only if* our clear and distinct ideas of size and shape provide an infallible licence to infer that matter exists with the properties of size and shape. If such an inference were not infallible, we could not be certain that our idea of extended matter does come from existing extended matter itself.

The claims of Passages C–F, properly disambiguated, may then be stated as follows:

1. We have 'sensory' or sense-based clear and distinct ideas of size and shape through which we infer the presence of material substance with the properties of size and shape (and hence form a derivative idea of extended matter).
2. But such ideas of size and shape could be immediately produced, not only by such material substance, but by God or non-material (finite) substance.

3 However, if they are produced by God or non-material substance, God would be a deceiver. These clear and distinct perceptions of size and shape ostensibly provide an infallible licence to conclude that material substance exists with the properties of size and shape (thus enabling us to see clearly that the idea of extended matter is ultimately derived from extended matter itself). God would be a deceiver if this licence turns out not to be infallible.
4 But God is a non-deceiver, so we *do* have an infallible licence to infer from our clear and distinct ideas of size and shape that material substance exists with the properties of size and shape.
5 Thus we know[5] that our (derivative) idea of extended matter ultimately derives from extended material substance with the properties of size and shape.
6 Material substance with the properties of size and shape therefore exists.

PEWP thus relies crucially upon an infallible God-guaranteed inference from clear and distinct 'sensory' or sense-based ideas of size, shape and so on to establish the existence of a material substance with these properties. (It is this inference that licenses us to conclude that our idea of extended matter is caused by extended matter.) But precisely what do these sensory clear and distinct ideas consist in? What are such perceptions *like*? To characterize them, we briefly examine two other sorts of perceptions of size and shape that do *not* provide such an infallible licence.

We may begin by going back to Descartes's account of the three grades of sensory response in the Sixth Set of Replies. In his discussion of the stick-example, Descartes points out that in the third grade of sensory response, the perceiver, 'on the basis of the extension of the colour and its boundaries together with its position in relation to the parts of the brain, [makes] a rational calculation about the size, shape and distance of the stick' (AT 7: 437, CSM 2: 295). There are *prima facie* grounds for holding that the 'sensory' ideas of size and shape that Descartes appeals to in PEWP are these third-grade judgements of specific size and shape. As mentioned, Descartes begins Passage C of PEWP by stating that 'we have sensory awareness of, or rather as a result of sensory stimulation, have . . . perceptions of [size and shape]'. One can reasonably take him to be referring here to a set of perceptions or ideas that we would *normally* characterize as 'sensory' ideas of size and shape, but in fact are third-grade judgements$_q$ based on sensory stimulation. (As indicated in Chapter 3, the judgement$_q$ that there is a certain size [to the stick] is in effect a 'sensory' idea$_m$ of specific size.)

However, third-grade ideas of *specific* sizes and shapes mentioned in the Sixth Set of Replies cannot be the ideas of size and shape appealed to in PEWP, for obvious reasons. Descartes clearly states in the Sixth Meditation that these third-grade ideas are not distinct, and may be mistaken (AT 7: 80, CSM 2: 55). Lacking distinctness, they cannot be the clear and distinct perceptions that Descartes appeals to in PEWP.

There is of course another class of ideas of size shape, which *are* accepted by Descartes as clear and distinct. These are the ideas of size and shape in the intellect/imagination discussed in the Fifth Meditation. As discussed in Chapter 3, commentators generally agree that these ideas of size and shape are clear and distinct insofar as they are recognized to conform immutably to geometrical laws.

However, this second class of ideas also does not provide an infallible licence to infer that matter exists. In the Fifth Meditation, Descartes states that the geometrical shapes and so on that he perceives may not exist 'anywhere outside my thought' (AT 7: 64, CSM 2: 45), indicating that these ideas do not allow an inference to the existence of matter. Again, assuming that these ideas are purely intellectual, their presence in the thinker does not license an inference that matter exists, since operations in the intellect do not require the presence of body. It might seem more promising if we hold that these ideas of size and shape involve the imagination, for Descartes maintains that the operations of imagination require embodiment. However, despite accepting in the Sixth Meditation that our imaginative operations afford a 'probable conjecture' that (our) body exists, Descartes concludes that the 'distinct idea of corporeal nature' in the imagination does not license a 'necessary inference' that our body exists (AT 7: 73, CSM 2: 51). The clear and distinct ideas of the imagination thus do not offer an infallible licence to conclude that matter exists.

It is often assumed that Descartes holds there are only two sorts of ideas of primary qualities – the non-distinct 'sensory' ideas of specific size and shape, and the distinct ideas of size and shape in the intellect/imagination discussed above (see Wilson 1999a: 26–40). As we've seen, however, neither provides a licence to infer that matter exists. But there is a third kind of idea of size and shape that Descartes appeals to in PEWP to establish that matter exists. This third kind of idea is both 'sensory' and clear and distinct. As such, it has elements in common with both the first two kinds, for it is located in the third grade of sensory response (like the former), but is also clear and distinct (like the latter).

Note that the third-grade 'sensory' ideas of specific sizes and shapes were not clear and distinct because one could be *wrong* in one's judgements$_q$ of these sizes and shapes. But one can have third-grade ideas of size and shape that are not ideas of *specific* sizes and shapes. Suppose that one is standing before an Olympic-sized swimming pool. One might well have a (third-grade) 'sensory' idea of a specific depth of two metres (and one might well be mistaken if one is unfamiliar with the effects of refraction). However, one could also perceive the pool as simply *having some depth*. In this case, one does not have an idea of a depth specifically of two metres, or of three metres – one simply has an idea of *depth*. More generally, when confronted with a given visual field, it is possible to have ideas of size and shape without thereby having ideas of *specific* sizes and shapes. One can perceive that there is extended magnitude, without necessarily perceiving that there are various *specific* magnitudes.

Descartes's account of the third grade of sensory response accommodates such ideas of non-specific magnitude. According to Descartes, the 'sensory' ideas of specific size and shape are in fact judgements$_q$ of intellect. But, as they are made at great speed from habit, we are wont to think that they derive from the senses *per se*. He includes these ideas among the preconceived opinions held since early childhood (see, for instance, AT 7: 437, CSM 2: 295 and AT 8A: 35–6, CSM 1: 219). Now, Descartes thinks it is possible to give up our preconceived opinions and replace them – indeed, this is a key goal of the *Meditations*. It follows that our intellect can replace its existing judgements$_q$ about specific sizes and shapes with new ones.

That this can be done is borne out phenomenologically by one's experiences. For example, after having made many mistakes concerning the specific depths of swimming pools, I may rationally conclude that I should give up my habit of making calculations of specific depths in such contexts. Thus, when I now look at swimming pools, I perceive only depth. In that case, I would now have a judgement$_q$ that there is merely depth – that is, a third-grade 'sensory' idea of depth *per se*.

Thus, one can have 'sensory' ideas of size and shape without having 'sensory' ideas of various *specific* sizes and shapes. Such ideas are then clear and distinct when a further condition is fulfilled. As mentioned, the ideas of size and shape in the imagination/intellect are clear and distinct insofar as one recognizes that they conform immutably to geometrical laws. Similarly, the ideas of size and shape in PEWP are clear and distinct insofar as one recognizes that the extended magnitudes they represent are such that they must also conform immutably to geometrical laws.[6]

In short, Descartes accepts that there are ideas that are both 'sensory' (present their objects as modes of things existing outside thought), and also clear and distinct, and he appeals to such ideas to establish the existence of matter in PEWP. This being so, it is plausible to claim that the 'sensory' clear and distinct ideas of size and shape mentioned in TMD are *precisely* those mentioned in PEWP. If this is right, then, *pace* Wilson, the account of 'sensory' clear and distinct ideas of size and shape in TMD is not puzzle-inducing and opaque, but reasonably cogent. Such 'sensory' clear and distinct ideas are those which present size and shape as 'modes existing outside thought' which conform immutably to geometrical laws. Again, *pace* Wilson, there is an evident phenomenological distinction between these ideas, and the confused and obscure ideas of colour, cold, etc. in TMD. Scrutiny of the clear and distinct 'sensory' ideas of size and shape reveals that size and shape conform immutably to geometrical laws; analysis of such size and shape (and the relations between them) results in the discovery of new, unforeseen but indisputable facts. In contrast, scrutiny of the ideas of colour and cold reveals that colour and cold do not share such immutable conformity to a set of laws (so far as Descartes could perceive them; subsequent discoveries in physics have of course shown otherwise).

But there is still an apparent difficulty with my account. As Wilson points out, TMD introduces a contrast meant to pave the way for Descartes's subsequent introduction of an existing corporeal world that has the features of size and shape but not colours and coldness. But how precisely does it 'pave the way'? After all, the proof of the external world in the *Meditations* (or PEWM) is generally accepted to be unlike PEWP, in that it is held to rely upon natural inclination (rather than clear and distinct ideas) to establish the existence of the external world. It is thus not precisely clear how the earlier distinction drawn in TMD between the distinct ideas of size and shape and the obscure ideas of colour and cold could play a role in a proof that appeals to natural inclination.

I will argue shortly that the 'sensory' clear and distinct ideas of PEWP are directly employed in the argument of PEWM. The argument of PEWM, contrary to common assumption, is quite similar in structure to that of PEWP: both rely on an infallible inference from the clear and distinct ideas of size and shape to the existence of matter with the properties of size and shape. In the *Meditations*, TMD first intro-

duces to our notice 'sensory' clear and distinct ideas of size and shape, and PEWM then appeals to them to establish the existence of the corporeal world. Before we proceed, however, it seems appropriate to note here that the preceding discussion introduces a refinement to my earlier account of how ideas represent their cause under ACP.

Refinement to ACP

Under ACP, an idea purports to represent its existing cause. Some of these (ostensible) causes include (as discussed earlier) corporeal objects like towers, stars and the sun. Thus, for instance, the idea of the sun purports, in ACP, to represent an existing sun (which causes the thinker to have this idea). Now the sun, for Descartes, is not an individual corporeal substance, but merely a mode of extended matter. Nevertheless, my recent discussion seems to require that this idea of the sun would still differ from the idea of the size or shape of the sun. Whereas the ideas of size and shape are of immediately perceived attributes, the idea of the sun would be *derivative*, insofar as it is (somehow) based upon these immediate ideas of size and shape.

There are two possible ways in which the idea of the sun could relate to the ideas of the size and shape on which it is based. First, the idea of the sun could be formed through an *inference*, made from the immediate ideas of specific size and shape, that there is a modification of matter that has the properties of specific size and shape.[7] In such a case, the inference would bear some similarity to the one made in PEWP (though it is not, of course, infallible). Second, the idea of the sun could be the *collection* of the various relevant ideas of size and shape. That is, the idea of the sun could be constituted by the ideas of size and shape that, when put together, are the idea of the sun. On either alternative, the idea of the sun, together with the relevant ideas of specific size and shape, are all judgements$_q$ occurring in the third grade of sensory perception. In both cases, the idea of the sun would require an additional judgement$_q$ that is not needed in the immediate ideas of size and shape.

Neither alternative is inconsistent with what I have said in the earlier chapters. The idea of the sun, formed derivatively through such indirect means, would still purport to represent its cause – where such a cause is either the particular modification of extended matter possessing the relevant properties of size and shape, or the collection of the relevant properties of size and shape. The arguments in this section thus refine (but do not contradict) the earlier account, by allowing that some sensory ideas mentioned in the earlier chapters may be based on other ideas (such as ideas of the sun, or towers), while other sensory ideas are immediate (ideas of size and shape). Both kinds of ideas, however, would still represent their cause.

The example discussed above involves a 'sensory' idea, such as the idea of the sun or the stick. But note also that the arguments in this chapter would also introduce a refinement to non-sensory ideas such as the idea of the thinking self or God. These ideas must also be derivative, that is, they must be formed from an inference from the immediate ideas of attributes (for instance, thought or infinitude) to the existence of a substance that exists and has these attributes. Once again, this is not

inconsistent with my earlier account. For example, the idea of the thinking self, formed through an inference from the immediate attribute of thought, still represents its cause, the substantial thinking self. Bearing these points in mind, we can go back to the discussion of how the ideas in TMD relate to the Sixth Meditation proof of the existence of the external world.

The proof of the external world in the Meditations

PEWM occurs in the Sixth Meditation. Below is a slightly abridged version of the text in which PEWM is commonly thought to occur. (I shall argue later that PEWM commences slightly earlier than is commonly thought.) Once again, the argument is divided into passages to facilitate subsequent discussion:

> [Passage A] Now there is in me a passive faculty of sensory perception, that is, a faculty for receiving and recognizing the ideas of sensible objects; but I could not make use of it unless there was also an active faculty . . . which produced or brought about these ideas.
>
> [Passage B] This faculty cannot be in me, since clearly it presupposes no intellectual act on my part, and the ideas in question are produced without my cooperation and often even against my will.
>
> [Passage C] So the only alternative is that it is in another substance distinct from me . . . This substance is either a body, that is, a corporeal nature, in which case it will contain formally [and in fact] everything that is to be found objectively [or representatively] in the ideas, or else it will be God, or some creature more noble than a body, in which case it will contain eminently whatever is to be found in the ideas.
>
> [Passage D] But since God is not a deceiver, it is quite clear that he does not emit the ideas to me either directly from himself, or indirectly, via some creature that contains the objective reality of the ideas not formally but only eminently.
>
> [Passage E] For God has given me no faculty at all for recognizing any such source for these ideas; on the contrary, he has given me a great inclination to believe that they are produced by corporeal things. So I do not see how God could be understood to be anything but a deceiver if the ideas were emitted from a source other than corporeal things. It follows that corporeal things exist.
>
> (AT 7: 79–80, CSM 2: 55)*

PEWM seems to begin much as PEWP does. Descartes finds that he receives through sense-perception the 'ideas of sensible objects'. (As these ideas will be constantly referred to in the following discussion, they are hereby abbreviated as ISOs). As he himself is not the cause of such ideas, he suggests possible alternative sources – God, another non-corporeal substance or body itself. However, in Passage E, PEWM appears to depart radically from PEWP, for Descartes appeals there to his own 'great inclination' (*magna propensio*) to believe that the source of his ideas is body. Given this inclination, and the fact that God is not a deceiver, body must exist.

The 'inclination' referred to in PEWM is often thought to be an instance of the natural inclinations highlighted in the later Sixth Meditation (which will receive further discussion in the next chapter). Such inclinations include ideas of thirst or hunger. They are bestowed by God on the human *qua* a combination of mind and body, and their proper purpose is to inform the human of 'what is beneficial or harmful' to her as a mind–body composite (AT 7: 82, CSM 2: 57). Commentators have voiced reservations about the plausibility of PEWM (see, for instance, Curley 1978: 229) and criticized its reliance on such natural inclination (for example, Gilson 1951: 307). But the common assumption that PEWM relies on natural inclination to establish the existence of body is a mistaken one. I now argue that PEWM, like PEWP, relies on clear and distinct 'sensory' ideas to establish the existence of matter.

To establish this, we may begin with a close look at the ISOs that Descartes alludes to in Passage A of PEWM. These ISOs are often referred to or re-described by commentators in vague terms, such as 'ideas of sense' or 'sensory experiences' (see, for instance, Newman 1994: 489–531, Wilson 1978: 202) Commentators have spent little time examining what Descartes includes under the ISOs, perhaps taking this to be self-evident. But one needs to consider this question closely to understand the argument of PEWM.

Prima facie, the most likely candidates for the ISOs would be sensory experiences of physical objects like trees, tables and the sun. Williams adopts this reading when he describes the ISOs as 'experiences of objects in an "external world"' (Williams 1978: 232). However, I now argue that this reading is ruled out by the claims that Descartes makes later in PEWM.

In passage C, Descartes, having excluded himself as a cause for the ISOs, lists the remaining possible causes for them:

> So the only . . . alternative is that [the cause is] another substance distinct from me . . . This substance is either a body, that is, a corporeal nature, *in which case it will contain formally* [and in fact] *everything that is to be found objectively* [or representatively] *in the ideas*, or else it will be God, or some creature more noble than a body, *in which case it will contain eminently whatever is to be found in the ideas*.
>
> (emphasis mine)

Descartes maintains here that whatever is objectively or representatively in the ISOs must either be eminently contained in God or some non-material substance, or formally contained in body or matter itself. That is, the objects represented in the ISOs (namely, ideas_{m} of sensible objects) must correspond to what is eminently contained in God or a non-material substance, or formally contained in material substance. Descartes subsequently concludes in Passage E that the ISOs have material substance as their cause. Given that the ISOs turn out to have material substance as their cause, it follows that the objects represented in the ISOs must correspond to what is formally contained in material substance. Thus, by the end of PEWM, Descartes is committed to this claim:

S_2: The objects represented in the ISOs must correspond to what is formally contained in material substance.

The question of what Descartes may have meant by formal containment has received considerable discussion. For instance, Clatterbaugh holds that a substance *X* would formally contain a mode or property *P* if and only if *X* exemplifies *P* (Clatterbaugh 1980: 386). O'Neill, in contrast, maintains that a substance *X* would formally contain a mode or property *P-of-N-degrees* if and only if *X* contains *N* degrees of *P* and all lesser degrees of *P* (O'Neill 1987: 235). It is clear, without delving in the merits of the various readings, that none of these readings allows that sensory ideas of physical objects like trees conform to the criterion for ISOs required by S_2.

Consider, for example, Jane's sensory idea of a particular palm tree. As just mentioned, Jane's idea of the tree is a derivative idea, based on the immediate ideas of specific size and shape (and, if Jane is a pre-Cartesian, also from immediate ideas of colour and so on). Such an idea is either formed from an inference based on immediate ideas of size, shape, and colour, or is the collection of these ideas of size, shape, and colour.

Now if Jane's idea of a palm tree is an ISO, the tree represented in the idea must be formally contained in matter. However, Jane may be seeing a mirage, or having a hallucination. In that case, the tree represented in Jane's idea need not correspond to what is formally contained in matter. That is, the tree (and its properties) need not be exemplified in matter (on Clatterbaugh's interpretation); or again, matter need not contain any degree of the properties of size and shape represented in the idea (on O'Neill's interpretation). Given S_2, Jane's idea of the tree thus would not qualify as an ISO, as one has no assurance that what it represents corresponds to anything formally contained in matter. More generally, ideas of physical objects such as trees and tables would not qualify as ISOs.

Again, the requirement in S_2 also clearly rules out that any immediate ideas of secondary qualities can be included in the ISOs. On any interpretation that we adopt of formal containment, it must be evident that Descartes would hold that the secondary qualities are *not* formally contained in matter. For instance, Descartes manifestly does not hold that matter exemplifies colour (in Clatterbaugh's terms), or that matter contains any degree of colour (in O'Neill's terms).[8] The Cartesian corporeal world is precisely one in which colours, smells and such are wholly absent!

S_2 also rules out that the non-clear-and-distinct sensory ideas of specific size and shape can be included among the ISOs. Suppose, for instance, that Jane has, in respect of the tree, a sensory idea of a specific height of 5 metres. If the height represented in this idea corresponds to what is formally contained in material substance, then it is either the case that this height is either exemplified in matter (on Clatterbaugh's reading), or that this height (and all lesser heights) are contained in matter (on O'Neill's reading). But it's quite possible that Jane has here an idea of a height of 5 metres, whereas what is exemplified or contained in matter is a height of 4.5 metres. (Indeed, if the tree in question is a hallucination, there may no corresponding height actually exemplified or contained in matter.) Thus, the specific

height represented in the idea need not correspond to any property formally contained in matter (on either Clatterbaugh's or O'Neill's reading).

When Descartes talks about ISOs in PEWM, what kinds of ideas would he then be referring to? Given the requirement that what is represented in the ISOs must be formally contained in matter, two possible candidates remain for the ISOs:

1 The clear and distinct 'sensory' ideas of non-specific size and shape such that these conform immutably to geometrical laws, or,
2 The derivative idea of extended matter formed through an inference based on these clear and distinct ideas.

However, (2) can be ruled out on the following grounds. Most commentators who discuss formal containment agree that it is *properties* or *modes* that are formally contained in a substance. Thus, sizes and shapes can be formally contained in matter. In contrast, the extended matter represented in this derivative idea in (2) is not formally contained in material substance, for it *is* material substance itself. Thus, we can conclude that the ISOs are essentially the 'sensory' ideas of clear and distinct size and shape, as it is only these ideas that fulfil the requirements of S_2.

That this is so is confirmed by Descartes's claim in Passage D that God's not being a deceiver ensures that God 'does not emit the ideas to me either directly from himself, or indirectly, via some creature that contains the objective reality of the [ISOs] not formally but only eminently'. In Passage D, Descartes makes clear that the ISOs contain objective reality (which God's non-deception then guarantees to derive from a formal and not eminent cause). In TMD, Descartes had established that it was only the clear and distinct 'sensory' ideas of size and shape that were known to contain objective reality. The ideas of cold and colour were so confused and obscure that one did not know whether they contained such objective reality (that is, one did not know whether they represent things or no things). Descartes's confident claim in PEWM that the ISOs *do* contain objective reality indicates that the ISOs must be limited to the clear and distinct 'sensory' ideas of size and shape.

We conclude that the ISOs are the clear and distinct sensory ideas of non-specific size and shape mentioned in TMD and PEWP. I now outline the entire proof structure of PEWM, showing that it is similar to PEWP insofar as it relies on an infallible inference from these ideas of size and shape to the existence of matter with these properties.

As mentioned earlier, it is commonly assumed that PEWM commences with passage A. But there are good grounds for thinking that it begins a little before that. At the beginning of the paragraph in which PEWM occurs, Descartes discusses the various faculties, and the types of substances they must inhere in. Just prior to passage A, Descartes makes the following point:

> Of course I also recognize that there are other faculties (*like those of changing position, of taking on various shapes, and so on*) which . . . cannot be understood apart from some substance for them to inhere in, and hence cannot exist without it. But *it is clear that these other faculties, if they exist, must be in a corporeal or extended*

> *substance and not an intellectual one*; for the *clear and distinct conception* of them includes extension, but does not include any intellectual act whatsoever.
>
> (AT 7: 78–9, CSM 2: 54–5, emphasis mine)

In this passage, which I shall label Passage 1, Descartes claims that he has a 'clear and distinct conception' of certain faculties (of changing position and of taking on various shapes and so on) as including extension. As a result, these faculties, if they exist, must exist in corporeal substance.

From where does Descartes derive his 'clear and distinct conception' of the faculties of changing position and so on? There are good grounds for holding that its source is the clear and distinct 'sensory' ideas of size and shape. The faculties mentioned in Passage 1 are *dynamical* faculties – they include the ability to *change* position or *take on* various shapes (over time). The dynamical character of such faculties is quite consonant with the view that one's conception of them derives from the distinct *sensory* ideas of size and shape, for our so-called 'sensory' perception over time must reveal that size and shape are susceptible to change and variation. Insofar as these variations are recognized to be such as must conform immutably to geometrical laws, one would gain from them a clear and distinct conception of the faculties of taking on different shapes and changing position.

Again, Descartes's claim that these distinctly conceived faculties, if they exist, '*must* be in a corporeal or extended substance' is a clear indication that their conception must have its source in the clear and distinct 'sensory' ideas of size and shape. Unlike the ideas in the intellect or imagination, the clear and distinct sensory ideas of size and shape specifically present themselves as modes existing outside thought, and seem to license infallibly the inference that material substance exists. Thus, insofar as Descartes holds that the faculties of taking on shape and so on *must* be thought of as inhering in material substance, one may infer that his conception of these faculties is derived from these sensory ideas.

I would argue that Passage 1 marks the beginning of PEWM. In it, Descartes states that he has a conception of certain faculties of taking on shape or changing position. However, he does not make the inference from his conception of these faculties to the existence of such faculties in matter. Instead, he makes the conditional claim that *if they exist*, such faculties must exist in extended matter.

Passage A then commences Descartes's attempt to establish that such faculties do exist, and that they exist in material substance. When Passage A is placed in the context of having come after Passage 1, it is evident that the ISOs refer to the distinct sensory ideas of size and shape. Passage A reads:

> Now truly there is indeed in me [*jam vero est quidem in me*] a passive faculty of sensory perception, that is, a faculty for receiving and recognizing the ideas of sensible objects, and I could not . . . [9]

In Passage 1, Descartes claimed that he had a clear and distinct conception of faculties of taking on shape and so on, whose most plausible source were the distinct sensory ideas of size and shape. Passage A then *confirms* that Descartes *does* gain such ideas

through the senses. As Descartes points out, there is truly indeed in him a sensory faculty for receiving the 'ideas of sensible objects' [ISOs] – by which he means that he truly has a sensory faculty for receiving the clear and distinct 'sensory' ideas of size and shape. But, he argues, this is possible only if there is a corresponding active faculty from which they derive. Thus, such an active faculty must exist.

In view of his powerful earlier scepticism concerning the existence of the corporeal world, and his earlier suggestion in TMD that the distinct 'sensory' ideas of size and shape may derive from himself, Descartes now needs to refute convincingly that there could be loci other than matter for this faculty. As in PEWP, Descartes's next step (in passage B) is to eliminate himself as the locus of this faculty, via introspection. He then proceeds, again as in PEWP, to eliminate the remaining alternatives – God and other non-corporeal substance. It is this last move that is of crucial interest.

Commentators often assume that Descartes eliminates these alternatives in PEWM through an appeal to a natural inclination. But the passage on which this assumption is based need not be read as supporting such an appeal:

> But since God is not a deceiver, it is quite clear that he does not transmit the ideas to me either directly from himself, or indirectly, via some (other) creature. . . . For God has given me no faculty at all for recognizing any such source for these ideas; on the contrary, *he has given me a great inclination to believe that they are produced by corporeal things*.

Contrary to common belief, the term 'inclination' (*propensio*) in the *Meditations* is not one that is obviously associated with the 'teachings of nature'. Descartes uses the term *propensio* four times in the *Meditations*, and in only one of the cases could it reasonably be seen as connected to a teaching of Nature (AT 7: 83, CSM 2: 57). More significantly, he uses the phrase 'great inclination' (*magna propensio*) only twice in the *Meditations*, once in this passage, and once in the Fourth Meditation.

The context in which the phrase occurs in the Fourth Meditation is indeed illuminating with respect to the argument of PEWM:

> For example, during these past few days I have been asking whether anything in the world exists, and I have realized that from the very fact of my raising this question it follows quite evidently that I exist. I could not but judge that something which I understood so clearly was true; but this was not because I was compelled so to judge by any external force, but *because a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will, and thus the spontaneity and freedom of my belief was all the greater in proportion to my lack of indifference*.
>
> (AT 7: 58–59, CSM 2: 41, emphasis mine)

Descartes points out in this passage that he understands clearly that the property of thought (when one asks 'whether anything in the world exists') infallibly licenses the inference that there is a substance (namely, a thinker) that has that thought. Such clarity of understanding is then followed by 'a great inclination in the will' to affirm the findings of the intellect.

Again, this great inclination of will to affirm what is clearly understood by the intellect is God-given. Descartes notes in the Fourth Meditation that the will is received from God, and goes on to elucidate that this God-given faculty is structured so that one feels a great inclination to affirm what is clearly understood by the intellect, and feels indifference between affirmation/denial to what is not clearly understood. The way to avoid error is to affirm only when one is propelled by this 'great inclination of will'.

Bearing in mind this use of 'great inclination', I now elucidate what Descartes really means when he maintains in PEWM that

> (God) has given me a great inclination to believe that (the ideas of sensible objects) are produced by corporeal things.

Just prior to this claim, Descartes had suggested in Passage D that the clear and distinct sensory ideas of size and shape could have been 'immitted' into him by God or a non-corporeal substance. In this passage, he dismisses the possibility by maintaining that God has given him a 'great inclination' to believe that these ideas of size and shape are produced by corporeal things. By this, he means that God has given him a great inclination to affirm what his intellect clearly understands – namely, that his distinct sensory ideas of size and shape infallibly license the inference that corporeal substance exists with the properties of size and shape. Since God had earlier been established to be a non-deceiver in the Fourth Meditation, he knows that such an inference is indeed infallible, and that it is true that body exists. Thus Descartes is able to conclude that:

> corporeal things exist . . . (at least insofar as) they possess all the properties which I clearly and distinctly understand, that is, all those which, viewed in general terms, are comprised within the subject matter of mathematics.
>
> (AT 7: 80, CSM 2: 55)[10]

Wilson is correct in claiming that TMD is concerned with 'developing the theme of knowledge of body'. But the distinction put in place in TMD is not obscure, nor does it (in some nebulous way) 'pave the way' for PEWM – rather, the clear and distinct 'sensory' ideas mentioned therein are well-defined, and they play a direct role in establishing the existence of a corporeal world with these properties. It is these clear and distinct 'sensory' ideas that provide an infallible inference to the existence of material substance with the properties of size, shape and so on.

But the role of TMD is not limited to its direct contribution to the proof of the external world in the Sixth Meditation. *Pace* Wilson, it also plays a crucial role in the arguments that immediately succeed it in the Third Meditation – the proofs of God's existence. In the remaining half of this chapter, I examine how it does this.

Materially false ideas that 'proceed from nothing'

To understand how TMD plays a role in the Third Meditation proofs of God's existence, we need first to recognize that it introduces into the *Meditations* a certain

crucial conception of nothing (*nihil*/*nihilum*). That TMD does this is perhaps not always evident to the contemporary reader, so she may miss out on this particular undercurrent in the passage.

The passage in TMD where this conception of nothing is most clearly expressed is the following:

> [I]f [my ideas] are false, that is represent no things, I know that by the natural light that they proceed [*procedere*] from nothing – that is, they are only in me because of a deficiency or lack of perfection in my nature.
>
> (AT 7: 44, CSM 2: 30)*

The usual reading of this passage is to see Descartes's statement that false ideas 'proceed from nothing' as more or less a re-emphasis of his previous statement that such ideas 'represent no things'. If ideas represent no things, then (one might argue) they fail to represent anything real (that is, they fail to represent things that have objective being). As such, these ideas proceed from nothing, since there is nothing real that they pick out or represent. This seems to be the reading given to the passage by Normore, who uses it as a basis to argue that materially false ideas are those that do not represent and which fail to pick out anything real (Normore 1986: 230).

However, such a reading would face a number of difficulties. To begin with, the passage would provide a quite empty explanation. To say that ideas proceed from nothing (if by this is meant only that the ideas do not pick out a corresponding real thing) is simply another way of saying that these ideas do not represent anything real. To *explain* the latter in terms of the former (as Descartes appears to be doing) does not seem to be very illuminating. Again, it is odd that Descartes should have to appeal to his 'natural light' to give an 'explanation' that is simply a restatement of what has gone before. In the other contexts in the *Meditations* in which the term 'natural light' occurs, the conclusion or inference illuminated by the natural light may be purportedly indubitable, but it is usually somewhat less obvious. For instance, Descartes discovers through the natural light that there is at least as much reality in the cause as in its effect (AT 7: 41, CSM 2: 28).

One may arguably evade the objections to this reading by modifying it in the light of what was argued in the previous chapter. On my account, when Descartes says in TMD that a false idea represents no thing, he means that it represents no 'real' thing. Arguably, when he then says that such an idea proceeds from nothing, he means that the idea has no cause external to the idea itself (in other words, there is no existing thing that is its cause). In this case, it is not so obvious that the statement that a false idea 'proceeds from nothing' is merely a reiteration of the statement that a false idea 'represents no thing'. One might argue that Descartes could well invoke the natural light to make an inference from the fact that the idea represents no 'real' thing, to the fact that it does not have an external cause and in that sense 'comes from nothing'.

However, this modified reading is still not entirely satisfactory. One question that comes up is why Descartes should go on in the passage to describe ideas that

proceed from nothing as those which are in him 'because of a deficiency or lack of perfection in my nature':

> [I]f [my ideas] are false, that is, represent no things, I know by the natural light that they proceed from nothing – *that is* [*hoc est*] they are in me only because of a deficiency and lack of perfection in my nature.
>
> (ibid., emphasis mine)

Why should Descartes think that there is some obvious link between the fact that these ideas proceed from nothing, and that they are in him because of some deficiency or imperfection in his nature? What is the link Descartes seems to see between an idea's not having a cause external to itself, and the deficiencies of his own nature?

Second, this reading maintains that when Descartes says that false ideas proceed from nothing, he means that these ideas do not have causes external to themselves. But if Descartes accepts that such ideas are in him because of a deficiency in his nature, then this deficiency could be said to be the cause of the false ideas. How could Descartes maintain that his ideas do not have an external cause, and in the next clause point out that his ideas come from or are caused by his own deficient nature?

Third, it is not obvious that this reading can be reconciled with the Causal Principle. One of the consequences of the Causal Principle is that 'something cannot arise from nothing'. As Descartes writes:

> [I]t is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause. For where, I ask, could the effect get its reality from, if not from the cause? And how could the cause give it to the effect unless it possessed it? *It follows from this that something cannot arise from nothing,* and also that what is more perfect – that is, contains more reality in itself – cannot arise from what is less perfect.
>
> (AT 7: 40–1, CSM 2: 28, emphasis mine)

On this reading, a false idea is one that proceeds from nothing insofar as it has no cause at all. Thus, it seems, such an idea is indeed something (namely, a false idea) that arises from nothing, which is a contravention of the Causal Principle.

Admittedly, one must tread carefully here. Insofar as such an idea has formal reality (as all ideas do), Descartes suggests that the cause of the idea could be the thinker himself (AT 7: 40, CSM 2: 27–8) Thus (false) ideas, *qua* formally real modes, do not contravene the Causal Principle, since they would be caused by something of greater or equal reality.

But this still leaves an unanswered question: what about the mistakenness or wrong-headedness that makes these formally real ideas materially false? How does one explain how such mistakenness comes about? Compare, for instance, my false idea of a powerless God, and my clear and distinct idea of an omnipotent God. Both these ideas could be caused by me insofar as they are modes of thought, and are

hence formally real. But my clear and distinct idea of God is also caused by (that is, comes from) an actual God. In contrast, it is pertinent to ask about the origin of my mistaken idea of God as powerless. In the passage under discussion, Descartes maintains that such a materially false idea would come from 'nothing'. But how could nothingness – blank absence – possibly give rise to an idea (of God as powerless) that is actually false? And supposing this falseness really does come from blank nothing, wouldn't the Causal Principle then be violated?

Thus, the readings I've outlined (Normore's, and the modified version I suggested) face a number of difficulties. But there is an alternative reading of the passage that eliminates these difficulties. This reading sees the passage as putting in place a rich conception of 'nothing', which will play a crucial role in the Third Meditation proofs of God's existence, as well as the subsequent argument of the *Meditations*.

Nihilum and its role in TMD

To the modern reader, 'nothing' (*nihilum*) is simply a blank, neutral absence. But Descartes's conception of 'nothing', based on that of his Scholastic predecessors, carries much richer connotations. In the Third Set of Objections, Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) refers to the Fourth Meditation:

> I understand, then, that error is not something real but merely a defect. Hence my going wrong does not need a faculty specially bestowed on me by God.
>
> (AT 7: 190, CSM 2: 133)

He objects that one indeed needs a positive faculty in order to go wrong:

> [I]n order to go wrong one needs the power of reasoning, or at least the power of imagining, and these are positive faculties which have been given to all those, and only those, who go wrong.
>
> (ibid.)

Descartes's reply is as follows:

> It is true that in order to go wrong we need the faculty of reasoning, or rather of judging (that is, affirming or denying), since error is a defect in this faculty. But *it does not follow that this defect is something real, any more than blindness is something real.*
>
> (AT 7: 190–1, CSM 2: 134, emphasis mine)

To Descartes, blindness is not something real or positive – rather it is the *absence* of something real or positive, namely sight (for the sake of the argument, I ignore the obviously real and varied physiological causes of blindness, unknown to seventeenth-century medicine). Thus, to Descartes blindness is literally nothing, it is an absence – but it is not neutral, 'harmless' absence. Rather, it is the absence *of* something (of

sight). As an absence of sight, blindness would be a defect, a deficiency. Thus, blindness is nothing (since it is an absence of sight), and yet is also a defect. Similarly, Descartes argues that (formal) error, which is a defect, is not something real – just as the defect of blindness is not something real (AT 7: 54, CSM 2: 38).

In treating blindness and error as the absence of the corresponding realities of sight and error-freedom, Descartes draws from a position common from late Antiquity to the sixteenth century that saw blindness as the absence of sight by analogy with darkness being the absence of light, silence the absence of sound, and so on. For instance, Augustine (354–430), whose influence on Descartes is well-documented, writes in *De Civitate Dei* that 'we are familiar with darkness and silence . . . but this is not by perception but by *absence* of perception' (CD 12: 7, emphasis mine).[11] Suárez, another strong influence, argues against the position that darkness and blindness 'truly belong to things themselves' – that is, actually exist in things (DM 54, 3: 3). Instead, he maintains, they are but the absences or 'removals' of existing things.

As always, there may be subtle differences between Descartes's position and that of his predecessors. For instance, Suárez (as mentioned in Chapter 3) holds that negations and privations do not actually exist, but may nevertheless have a kind of being as objects of a thinker's thought. Suárez includes such privations and negations among '*beings* of reason', indicating that, while they may be absences in the actual world, they have a kind of being when thought about in the intellect.

Descartes's position is somewhat different. As shown in Chapter 3, there are two kinds of being or reality for Descartes. First, a thing can of course actually exist. Second, a thing can have objective being in the thinker's intellect. But Descartes maintains that it is *only* real things or possible existents that have such objective being. Descartes accepts that one can have a thought[12] of an absence like darkness, but in this case, he holds that the thought is directed at *nullas res*. In this, he is unlike Suárez, who maintains that privations and negations that are thought about have some sort of being in the intellect.

Notwithstanding these differences, Descartes and his predecessors share the fundamental assumption that darkness and blindness are (at some ontological level) absences or nothings. Descartes also follows his late-Scholastic predecessors in identifying reality with perfection. For example, he writes in the Third Meditation:

> It follows from [the Causal Principle] that what is *more perfect – that is, contains in itself more reality* – cannot arise from what is less perfect.
>
> (AT 7: 41, CSM 2: 28, emphasis mine)

For Descartes, an absence of reality is an absence of perfection. Thus, blindness is an absence of (the reality or perfection of) sight; error is the absence of the perfection of error-freedom. Blindness and error, as Descartes makes clear to Hobbes, are deficiencies or defects. This being the case, one might claim that defects in general are the absences of the corresponding perfections. The link between nothingness and deficiency then becomes more perspicuous. Insofar as an absence of perfection is an absence, it is nothing; insofar as it is an absence *of* perfection, it is a deficiency.

With that in place, we may look again at our passage from TMD:

> [I]f [my ideas] are false, that is, represent no things, I know by the natural light that they proceed from nothing – that is, they are in me only because of a deficiency and lack of perfection in my nature.
>
> (ibid.)*

Given the arguments above, what Descartes means when he says that false ideas 'proceed from nothing' is that such ideas proceed from an absence of perfection in him. Insofar as an idea is false and tempts Descartes to error, the having of such an idea is an imperfection, a deficiency in himself. Thus, when Descartes maintains that ideas, insofar as they are false, proceed from nothing, he means that his having of these deceptive ideas is due to an absence of perfection in his nature.

This reading resolves some of the puzzles raised earlier. First, Descartes's assertion that false ideas 'proceed from nothing' is not a pointless reiteration of his earlier assertion that false ideas 'represent no things'. Rather, Descartes is making two quite different points. When he says that such ideas 'represent no things', he means that such ideas do not represent a (real) thing. When he says that such false ideas 'proceed from nothing', he means that the having of such false ideas is due to an absence of perfection, to a lack in his nature. Thus, it is not surprising that he has to invoke the natural light to illuminate the connection between the two. (The natural light shows him that if he has ideas that are false, then such ideas must be due to a deficiency in his nature.)

Second, this reading would account for why Descartes appears to elaborate upon his assertion that false ideas 'proceed from nothing' by adding that they are 'only in [him] because of a deficiency and lack of perfection in [his] nature'. As pointed out, there is a clear link between nothingness and defect on this reading. Thus, Descartes is able to clarify his assertion that false ideas proceed from nothing by explaining that what he means by this is that such ideas are due to an absence (of some perfection) in him.

Third, on this reading, it can clearly be seen that Descartes does not contravene the Causal Principle when he asserts that false ideas proceed from nothing. One of the puzzles mentioned earlier concerns how falseness in ideas (which was apparently 'something') could come from nothing. But now one can see that, for Descartes, this falseness in ideas, being a defect, is not something, but nothing – it is an absence of perfection in these ideas. As such, it 'proceeds from' nothing, that is, from an *absence* of perfection in Descartes's nature. Thus, Descartes has not contravened his earlier principle that 'something cannot arise from nothing'.

But one difficulty still remains. In the last chapter, it was pointed out that, in the Third Meditation, a false idea is essentially one that has no cause.[13] Now one might object that if such ideas are due to an absence of perfection in Descartes, would not this absence be the *cause* of the false ideas? In that case, would not false ideas have a cause (albeit a deficient or privative one)? Thus, it is not obvious that the reading offered here of false ideas as proceeding from a deficiency can be reconciled with my earlier view, discussed in Chapter 3, that false ideas in the Third Meditation have no cause.

I now argue that, for Descartes, false ideas indeed have no cause, and the explanation of false ideas in terms of Descartes's own deficiencies is *not* a causal explanation – at least, not if one construes 'cause' in its Third Meditation sense.

In his Third Meditation statement of the Causal Principle, Descartes makes it clear that he is concerned with the relation between an *efficient* cause and its effect (AT 7: 40, CSM 2: 28). In an introduction to his translation of DM 54, John Doyle points out that Suárez essentially held that an efficient cause must be the cause of existence, whether objective or actual (Suárez 1995: 26). Augustine, too, held a similar position. For instance, he writes that we should not 'look for any efficient cause of the evil act of the will', because this is 'not a matter of efficiency but deficiency' (CD 12: 7). Because the evil choice is defective and lacks being or perfection, Augustine holds that it has no efficient cause. For Augustine and Suárez, an efficient cause must always be the cause of being or perfection.

Descartes evidently takes the same position. In his Third Meditation elaboration of the Causal Principle, Descartes assumes that all effects must have being:

> Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much [reality] in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause . . . It follows from this [principle] that something cannot arise from nothing, and also that what is more perfect – that is, contains in itself more reality – cannot arise from what is less perfect. . . . And *this is transparently true not only in the case of effects which possess actual or formal reality, but also in the case of ideas, where one is considering only objective reality*.
>
> (AT 7: 40–1, CSM 2: 28, emphasis mine)

In the above passage, Descartes reminds the reader that effects need not only have actual or formal reality – they may also have objective reality. The assumption is that effects must have reality *of some sort* – whether it is objective or formal.

It is such real or existing effects that Descartes then claims must have an existing cause:

> For just as the objective mode of being belongs to ideas by their very nature, so the formal mode of being belongs to the causes of ideas by *their* very nature.
>
> (AT 7: 42, CSM 2: 29)

Descartes's Third Meditation discussion of the Causal Principle thus assumes that the effects of efficient causes must (by definition) be positive and have reality (whether objective or formal), and that their causes must correspondingly have formal reality (that is, they must exist).

Given that Descartes thinks that a cause must by definition be a cause with formal reality (and give rise to what is objectively or formally real), false ideas must then have no (efficient) cause, since such ideas, insofar as they are false, 'proceed from' an absence of perfection. For Descartes, the Third Meditation explanation of how false ideas come about does *not* count as an efficient causal explanation (because 'cause' means for him a formally real cause, whose effect is either formally or objectively real).

But this of course raises a question: if the explanation of how false ideas proceed from a deficiency is not an (efficient) causal explanation, then what sort of explanation is it? I now try to answer this.

The rubric of absence explanations

Before trying to determine the *sort* of explanation being given in the passage, we should spell out more precisely the explanation itself. Thus far, it has been argued that what Descartes essentially maintains in the passage is that false ideas 'proceed from nothing' insofar as they are due to an absence of perfection. But what does one mean by 'due to' in this case? How are such false ideas due to an absence of perfection? Again, what precisely is the nature of the 'absence of perfection' that these ideas proceed from? I look at the latter question first.

As mentioned earlier, Descartes equates perfection with reality. But things can have reality in two ways – they can either actually exist, or have objective being. Correspondingly, then, perfection would come in two forms – actual perfection or objective perfection. At the point of TMD, Descartes does not have a complete account of what actually *does* exist – that is, he has no clear notion of what actual perfections there are. As far as actual things or perfections go, he knows merely that he exists as a thinking substance who is possessed of various attributes and modes. In TMD, he suggests that, if he has false ideas, they are 'in [him] because of a deficiency and lack of perfection in his nature'. This suggests that if false ideas are in him, it is because, *qua* thinking substance, he lacks some attribute or perfection. But what is this attribute or perfection that is lacking in Descartes?

Given that Descartes knows at this point only that he is a thinking thing with a series of thoughts, it may not be immediately evident what he takes this missing attribute to be. By the end of the Sixth Meditation, having established that he is an embodied thinking thing, he would be able to give a quite precise account of some of the (structural) deficiencies in him that contribute to his having false ideas (insofar as these ideas are derived from the senses). But in the Third Meditation, this account is not yet available. So what can Descartes mean – at this point – when he claims that his false ideas are due to the absence of some attribute or perfection in him? What is this missing attribute?

The attribute Descartes now finds he lacks is, quite simply, the attribute of always having ideas that accurately represent states of affairs, that could never provide material for error. In the Fourth Meditation, when he is considering whether God could have created him as a being who never made mistakes, Descartes writes:

> I can see . . . that God could easily have brought it about that, without losing my freedom, and despite the limitations in my knowledge, I should nonetheless never make a mistake. *He could, for example, have endowed my intellect with a clear and distinct perception of everything about which I was likely to deliberate.*
>
> (AT 7: 61, CSM 2: 42, emphasis mine)

This passage refers back to what TMD had established. In TMD, Descartes maintained that the possibility that some of his 'confused and obscure' ideas might be false showed him that he lacked the attribute (perfection) of having only clear and distinct ideas, which do not lead him astray. Descartes's explanation in TMD of why he has false ideas is thus simply that they occur because he lacks the perfection of having ideas which will always 'get it right', which always represent truly.

This seems to leave Descartes with a not-very-useful 'explanation' of how his false ideas come about. What Descartes is saying here is this: his ideas, insofar as they are false, are due to the absence in him of the perfection of having only ideas which always represent truly. The explanation seems to be an empty one. Descartes is explaining that he has false ideas, because he lacks the attribute of always having true ones.

At first sight, this doesn't seem to be much of an explanation at all. However, in Descartes's view, it counts as an acceptable explanation because it conforms to an acceptable explanatory rubric first proposed by Aristotle. Aristotle had suggested that there were four types of causes – the material, the formal, the efficient and the final – and correspondingly four types of explanation. Descartes's contemporaries by and large accepted this Aristotelian framework, in which any explanation that appealed to one of the four causes could be accepted as a valid one.

Descartes himself, however, has usually been seen as one of the crucial figures whose work led to the abandoning of the Aristotelian framework of explanation. In his physics, Descartes aggressively sought explanations that invoked purely efficient causes. He argued repeatedly that there was no place for final-cause explanations in physics (see, for instance, AT 7: 55, CSM 2: 39 and AT 8A: 15–16, CSM 1: 202). Again, Descartes is often portrayed (correctly) as rejecting formal-cause explanations in physics as barren and pointless. Because of his physics, Descartes has sometimes been seen as wholly rejecting the Aristotelian framework of explanation – in particular, he is thought to reject that there are acceptable explanations that invoke formal and final causes.

However, although Descartes is emphatically against formal and final-cause explanations in physics, it does not follow that he is against formal and final-cause explanations *tout court*. Recent work (for instance in Simmons 2001) has shown that Descartes's account of the role of sensations in human life appeals to teleological considerations, in which the form of the human being (*qua* an embodied being with sensations and appetites) is connected to the ends of human life. Again, work has been done that emphasizes Descartes's retention of essentialism, which is the position that knowledge of the essences of things is prior to knowledge of the existence of things (see, for instance, Flage and Bonnen 1999, Secada 2000). In his *Physics*, Aristotle defines a formal cause as 'the form or the archetype, i.e. the definition of the essence'. Given that Aristotle takes the formal cause of a thing to be its essence, and given Descartes's essentialism, it is evident that Descartes does not entirely eschew formal-cause explanations (at least in metaphysics).

Textual evidence that Descartes is comfortable with an appeal to a formal cause in metaphysics is found in the Fourth Set of Replies. There, Descartes invokes the formal cause to explain why God is the cause of his own existence:

> Those who follow the sole guidance of the natural light [in the question of how God is the cause of his own existence] will . . . spontaneously form a concept of cause that is common to both an efficient and a formal cause: that is to say, what derives its existence 'from another' will be taken to derive its existence from that thing as a formal cause, while what derives its existence 'from itself' will be taken to derive its existence from itself as a formal cause – that is, because it has the kind of essence which entails that it does not require an efficient cause.
>
> (AT 7: 238, CSM 2: 166–67)[14]

Here, Descartes maintains that God is the formal cause of himself – that is, his essence is such that he does not need a (prior) efficient cause. He also specifically mentions in the course of his argument that his use of 'formal cause' in this passage 'follows the footsteps of Aristotle' (AT 7: 243, CSM 2: 169).

There is thus ample evidence that Descartes accepts formal-cause explanations, at least in metaphysics. Given that this is so, it is plausible to claim that Descartes's explanation of how false ideas might come about is a formal cause explanation.[15] In TMD, Descartes explains that he has false ideas by pointing out that 'they are in me only because of a deficiency and lack of perfection *in my nature*'. This explanation has a similar form to the formal cause explanation of why God exists. That is, just as Descartes explains why God exists in the Fourth Set of Replies by appealing to the nature or essence of God, so he explains in the Third Meditation why Descartes might have false ideas simply by appealing to Descartes's nature or essence. God exists without an efficient cause because it is part of his essence that he does this. Similarly, if Descartes has false ideas, it is simply because it is part of his essence (as a human thinking thing) that he lacks the attribute of having only ideas that are clear and distinct, which would never provide material for error. The question: 'How is it that Descartes could have false ideas?' would essentially have as reply: 'Because he wouldn't be a human thinking substance if he did not – it is part of his nature and essence that his ideas, not always clear and distinct, may turn out to be materially false'.

As argued above, Descartes establishes in TMD a rich notion of 'nothing' as the absence *of* something, the absence *of* some perfection. He points out that insofar as his ideas are false, they would proceed from nothing, an absence – specifically, the absence in his nature of the attribute of having only clear and distinct ideas (ideas that always get it right). I'll argue shortly that the rich notion of 'nothing' expressed in TMD plays an important role in the Third Meditation proofs of God's existence. Before this, however, we pause briefly to consider a possible objection to the account given thus far.

On the account given above, an idea, insofar as it is false, would 'proceed from' an absence of perfection in Descartes (namely, the perfection of always having ideas guaranteed to 'get it right'). If this is correct, then it would not just be ideas that 'represent no things as things' that 'proceed from nothing'. Rather, *any and all* materially false ideas would 'proceed from nothing' (that is, from an absence of perfection). In the Third Meditation, this would encompass ideas that contain no

objective reality; by the end of the Sixth, this would also include ideas that purport to represent their cause, but either do not have such a cause, pick out the wrong cause, or misrepresent the correct cause. All such ideas would 'proceed from nothing' insofar as they are due to an absence of perfection in Descartes.

This position is apparently in tension with my earlier claim that under ACP, false ideas that misrepresent their cause come from a formally real cause (while failing to represent that cause accurately). As indicated earlier, my false idea of the sun as very small would (in the Sixth Meditation) represent the existing sun (although it would misrepresent it). Such an idea would have an existing cause (the sun itself). But if this false idea of the sun has an existing cause, how can it be consistently claimed that the idea also 'proceeds from nothing'?

This objection can be dealt with as follows. My false idea of the sun would have an existing cause insofar as it 'comes from' the sun itself, and insofar as it accurately depicts that sun (that is, insofar as the sizes, shapes and so on portrayed in the relevant immediate ideas correspond to what is formally contained in matter). However, insofar as this idea *fails* to represent accurately the sun (that is, insofar as the sizes, shapes, and colours in the relevant immediate ideas are not formally contained in matter), it would 'proceed from nothing'. This is because the defects or imperfections in the idea would be due to my own deficiency as a thinking thing. Thus, it is not incompatible that an idea could have an existing cause (insofar as it comes from and represents some existing cause) and yet also proceed from nothing (insofar as it does not accurately portray that cause).

Materially false ideas and the proofs of God's existence

It has been argued that 'nothing' (*nihilum*) can signify an absence *of* something, *of* a perfection. If one understands that 'nothing' can carry this connotation, then interesting new perspectives emerge concerning Descartes's discussion of the ideas of heat and cold in TMD.

As mentioned earlier, one reason why Descartes brings TMD into the Third Meditation is to establish the contrast between the clear and distinct ideas of size and shape and the confused and obscure ideas of heat and cold. This contrast, as we have seen, paves the way for the institution of a material world in which size and shape is present, but heat and cold may not be.

But Descartes brings in TMD for another reason – because he wants to make a point about the relationship between one's conception of a perfection and of its corresponding absence. In TMD, Descartes writes:

> The ideas . . . of heat and cold contain so little clarity and distinctness that they do not enable me to tell whether cold is merely the privation of heat, or vice versa, or whether both of them are real qualities, or neither is.
>
> (AT 7: 44, CSM 2: 30)*

In the above discussion on the ideas of heat and cold, Descartes makes the following suggestion: suppose that cold is an absence of heat, or vice versa. As suggested

earlier, 'nothing' can signify an absence *of* something, *of* some perfection. Seen in this light, we can see that when Descartes suggests that cold may be the privation (absence)[16] of heat, what he means is that cold may be the absence of a perfection (heat) rather than a perfection itself. That is, cold may not be a real mode, but rather the absence or deficiency of some real mode (heat). Similarly, Descartes suggests, it is also possible that heat may be the absence of cold – that is, it may be cold that is the perfection (mode), and heat that is the absence or deficiency of that perfection (mode).

This suggestion raises important questions about Descartes's earlier assumptions. Early in the Third Meditation, Descartes had classified his various thoughts thus: some of his thoughts are ideas strictly in themselves – that is, are as-if images of things, and others have an additional form, say, of desire or affirmation towards these ideas as if of things. Central to this account is the assumption that a thought is always (at least purportedly) *of a positive thing*. (It may also then have an additional form towards that picture.) Or more narrowly, it is assumed that an idea (without additional forms) must always be as if of a *thing,* a positive being.

Nothing in the Third Meditation account prior to TMD challenges this assumption. As argued earlier, the discussion of the Causal Principle and its implications had been couched in largely positive terms. It was assumed that all effects are positive, and have formal or objective reality; and that their causes have equal or greater reality. In particular, it certainly sounded as if all ideas contained objective reality:

> it is true that the idea of heat . . . cannot exist in me unless it is put there by some cause which contains at least as much reality as I conceive to be in the heat . . .
>
> (AT 7: 41, CSM 2: 28)

By the end of this discussion, it seemed not only that all ideas were as-if of things (that is, purported to represent a positive thing), but that they *really* represented a 'thing' (that is, a thing with objective being).

It is at this point that the discussion of heat and cold in TMD comes in to challenge these assumptions. To begin with, it turns out that ideas which are as-if of things may not *really* be of things at all. For instance, if cold is nothing but an absence of heat, then the idea of cold which is as-if of a thing does not really represent a thing. Thus, an idea may be as-if of a thing and yet fail to *be* of a thing.

In addition, TMD also challenges Descartes's earlier classification of his thoughts. He had earlier classified his thoughts into two (broad) categories: strict ideas that are 'as-if images of things', and thoughts with additional forms towards such as-if images of things. But now it emerges that one's perceptions need not always be as-if of *things*. In noting that actual cold may be a privation of heat (or vice versa), Descartes now accepts that one can also have a perception as if of an *absence* of a thing. For, in conceiving that cold may be an absence of a mode or perfection, one has just this sort of a perception of an absence.

Thus, the discussion of heat and cold establishes that one can have thoughts (divested of any additional form) that would not be ideas strictly taken – that is,

would not necessarily be as-if of things. Rather one can have thoughts which are as-if of absences of perfection. Descartes wavers between calling these thoughts 'ideas' in an extended sense (he does this in the Fourth Meditation) and merely calling them 'perceptions' or 'conceptions'[17] (as in the Third Meditation), reserving the term 'idea' for the strict sense (AT 7: 44–6, CSM 2: 30–1). But whatever the terminology, the discussion of heat and cold in TMD establishes that one can have perceptions of absences of perfection.

Moreover, the discussion in TMD also hints at the relationship between these perceptions of absences of perfection and the perceptions of the perfections themselves. In TMD, Descartes perceives that cold may be a privation or absence of heat. But to have a perception of cold as an absence, one has first to conceive of the perfection that it is an absence of. That is, I cannot conceive of cold as an absence of heat, unless I have a conception of the mode of heat itself. More generally, one can't conceive of the absence of a perfection without having a conception of the perfection itself.

In short, then, what the passage on heat and cold establishes is this. First, one can have a perception that is not (as-if) of a thing (perfection), but (as-if) of an absence of a thing (perfection). Second, this conception of an absence of perfection is only possible if one has a conception of the perfection that is absent. As I shall show, these discoveries will play an important role in the Third Meditation proofs of God's existence.

As argued earlier, the passage in TMD on the origin of false ideas (as proceeding from nothing) had established that a deficiency was nothing – an absence of perfection. Again, that passage had intimated that Descartes himself might be deficient and suffer an absence of perfection, insofar as he has materially false ideas. Now, it has been established that the discussion on the ideas of heat and cold suggests that one can only perceive an absence of perfection if one has a perception of the perfection that is absent. These findings play a crucial role in the subsequent Third Meditation arguments for God's existence.

The Third Meditation arguments for God's existence

The Third Meditation arguments for God's existence have essentially one theme: the constant comparison between the actual weakness and imperfection of Descartes, and the complete perfection and omnipotence of the idea of God that he finds within him – and the subsequent conclusion that this situation would only be possible if God really does exist. I shall show that, in approaching this theme from its various perspectives, Descartes constantly refers back to what he had established in TMD.

We can begin with Descartes's opening salvo in his first argument for God's existence:

> I must not think that, just as my conceptions of rest and darkness are arrived at by negating movement and light, so my perception of the infinite is arrived at, not by means of a true idea but merely by negating the finite. On the contrary, I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a

> finite one, and hence that my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is, myself. For how could I understand that I doubted or desired – that is, lacked something – and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being that enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?
>
> (AT 7: 45–6, CSM 2: 31)

It is quite clear that the argument in this passage builds upon what has been established in TMD. Descartes begins by invoking a pair of opposing ideas much like those of heat and cold in TMD – the pairs of rest and movement,[18] and of darkness and light. Just as he had discovered that he could have a perception of cold as the absence of heat, so he now suggests that he can similarly perceive rest as the absence of movement, or darkness as the absence of light. In such a case, his perceptions of rest and darkness presuppose his prior perceptions of (respectively) movement and light. That is, just as he could not conceive cold as a privation without first conceiving heat as a perfection, so he cannot conceive of rest and darkness as absences of perfection without first conceiving movement and light as perfections (that is, as modes of substance).

Descartes then asks whether his perception of infinitude is like his perception of rest, and darkness.[19] That is, he asks whether he can conceive of infinitude as an absence of finitude (just as he can conceive of cold as the absence of heat). He argues that this is impossible.

First, as he had established earlier in the Third Meditation, the idea of infinite substance contains *greater* perfection (more objective reality) than the idea of finite substance, so how can he conceive of infinite substance as lacking the perfection of finite substance? Second, Descartes conceives of infinite substance as the agglomeration of all the supreme perfections. As he had just pointed out, his idea of God is of a substance 'infinite, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful and [the creator of] both myself and everything else' (AT 7: 45, CSM 2: 31). Thus an infinite substance is one that possesses all supreme perfections to a supreme degree. Such a substance could not be lacking in any way: in possessing all supreme perfections supremely, it is complete perfection.

Given these considerations, he could not conceive of infinite substance as lacking the perfection of finite substance. Thus, he must conceive of finite substance as lacking the perfection of infinite substance. In that case, he concludes, he must have the idea of infinitude before he can have the perception of finitude (as a lack of infinitude) – just as he must have the idea of heat before he can have one of cold as a lack of heat.

Once Descartes has established this, he looks at himself as a thinking thing. Descartes had pointed out in the Second Meditation that he was a thing that doubted and desired (AT 7: 28, CSM 2: 19). But now he looks at himself in the light of what he has learnt about the relationship between perfection and the lack thereof. That he can doubt implies that he lacks full knowledge and omniscience (since the latter would be accompanied by certainty); that he desires implies that he lacks omnipotence (since one would only desire if one lacks some object, and wishes

to attain it). That Descartes suffers these lacks indicates to him that he is finite, and hence lacks the complete perfection that is infinitude.

But, as he had shown, he must have an idea of infinitude and complete perfection *before* he can perceive himself as finite and lacking complete perfection. Where then does this idea of infinitude come from? It cannot come from himself as finite being, since he can perceive himself as finite only if he already has a prior idea of infinitude, with which he compares himself and finds himself wanting. Thus, Descartes concludes, there must be something outside him that is the cause of this idea. Given the principle that a cause must have formal reality at least equal to the (formal or objective) reality of its effect, this cause of his idea of infinite substance can only be infinite substance itself. Thus, God or infinite substance must exist.

This first argument clearly builds on what TMD had established. As TMD had shown, any deficiency or lack is an absence of perfection, and one can conceive a deficiency only if one first has an idea of the perfection whose absence constitutes the deficiency. In this first argument, Descartes inspects himself, in the light of his findings. His recognition of his own imperfection leads him to ask where the idea of complete perfection (which is presupposed by this recognition of deficiency in himself) could have come from. Thus, Descartes uses what he has learnt in TMD to argue from his own recognized imperfection to the existence of a completely perfect God.

This theme – that Descartes's own imperfections point the way to the existence of a completely perfect God – is played over again in the coda to the first argument for God's existence. There, Descartes, having argued that the idea of infinitude and complete perfection must have come from some being beyond him, confirms once again that this idea really cannot have come from himself. Descartes begins thus:

> [P]erhaps I am something greater than I myself understand, and all the perfections which I attribute to God are somehow in me potentially, though not yet emerging or actualized. For I am now experiencing a gradual increase in my knowledge, and I see nothing to prevent its increasing more and more to infinity . . . finally, if the potentiality for these perfections is already within me, why should not this be enough to generate the idea of such perfections?
>
> (AT 7: 46–7, CSM 2: 32)

But he then rejects the possibility that he himself is the source of his idea of complete perfection:

> But all this is impossible. First, though it is true that there is a gradual increase in my knowledge, and that I have many potentialities which are not yet actual, this is all quite irrelevant to the idea of God, which contains absolutely nothing that is potential; indeed this gradual increase in knowledge is itself the surest sign of imperfection. What is more, even if my knowledge always increases more and more, I recognize that it will never actually be infinite, since it will never reach the point where it is not capable of further increase; God, on the other hand, I take to be actually infinite, so that nothing can be added to his perfection. And finally I perceive that the objective being of an idea cannot be

> produced merely by potential being, which strictly speaking is nothing, but only by actual or formal being.
>
> (ibid.)

Here, Descartes tries to perceive himself in the most positive light possible, and asks himself whether, seen from this positive perspective, he might be the cause of his idea of infinitude. As he suggests, though imperfect and suffering from a deficiency of perfection, he is able gradually to improve himself, perhaps infinitely. Could he not then be the cause of his idea of infinitude?

But once again, the capacity to improve itself turns out to be evidence of deficiency and imperfection. The mere fact that one is striving to attain perfection already presupposes that one lacks it. Thus, Descartes is back at his starting point: he recognizes himself as a being who lacks the perfection it strives for, and this recognition of imperfection is contrasted with a (prior) idea of God as infinite, as utterly perfect – which idea therefore cannot come from himself but must come from somewhere else. Once again, the interplay between utter perfection and the deficiencies that result from its lack draws on themes that were put in place by TMD.

Themes that were developed in TMD are thus in play in the first argument for God's existence in the Third Meditation; and they are also in play in the second argument. In the second argument, Descartes once again considers himself as an imperfect being, with an idea of an utterly perfect God in him – and asks if he could have created himself with this idea in him. He answers himself thus:

> Yet if I derived my existence from myself, then I should neither doubt, nor want, nor lack anything at all; for I should have given myself all the perfections of which I have any idea, and thus I should myself be God.
>
> (AT 7: 48, CSM 2: 33)

He goes on to point out that it would have been much harder for him as a thinking substance to emerge from nothing than it would be for him to acquire those perfections he now lacks. If he had indeed created himself, he would certainly have endowed himself with all the perfections he perceives in his idea of God, and which he manifestly lacks – for the latter would be easier to achieve than the former. As he writes:

> I must not suppose that the items I lack would be more difficult to acquire than those I now have. On the contrary, it is clear that, since I am a thinking thing or substance, it would have been far more difficult for me to emerge out of nothing than merely to acquire knowledge of the many things of which I am ignorant . . . And indeed if I had derived my existence from myself, which is a greater achievement, I should certainly not have denied myself the knowledge in question, which is something much easier to acquire, or indeed any of the attributes which I perceive to be contained in the idea of God; for none of them seem any harder to achieve.
>
> (ibid.)

This second argument takes off (like the first) from the contrast between Descartes's own lack and the perfections to be found in the idea of God held up before him. In this second argument, Descartes finds that the very fact that he desires but lacks many perfections implies a very deep-seated lack – the lack of omnipotence and creative power. For he finds that the fact that he lacks many perfections implies that he could not have the power to create himself: if he had had that power, he would also have had the lesser power of endowing himself with all the perfections found in his idea of God. Since he obviously lacks this lesser power, he must lack the greater. Thus Descartes finds himself as deficient, as lacking perfection in yet another respect, for he finds that he lacks creative power. Since he patently exists, and could not have created himself, there must obviously be some greater power which both creates him and keeps him in being:

> For since I am nothing but a thinking thing – or at least since I am now concerned only and precisely with that part of me which is a thinking thing – if there were such a power [to keep me in being] in me, I should undoubtedly be aware of it. But I experience no such power, and this very fact makes me recognize most clearly that I depend on some being distinct from myself.
>
> (AT 7: 49, CSM 2: 33–4)

Once again, this argument, which has its roots in Descartes's perception of his own imperfection and the perfection in his idea of God, builds upon the relationship between perfection and its absence established in TMD.

In sum, then, the Third Meditation arguments for God's existence depend crucially on Descartes's perception of himself as deficient and imperfect, and on the contrast between this perception and the idea of God as complete perfection. Descartes's discovery that he fails, in his weakness and finitude, to measure up to this idea of a substance that is 'infinite, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful' eventually leads him (by various routes) to the conclusion that a perfect God exists beyond him. This form of argument would not have been possible without the earlier introduction of TMD, which established the character of imperfection (as an absence or lack of perfection) and outlined the relationship between the conception of such an absence and its corresponding perfection.

Wilson had argued that the introduction of the notion of material falsity might be an impediment to the Third Meditation arguments for the existence of God. That an idea could be false implied that it might not contain the objective reality it purported to contain. In that case, the Third Meditation proof(s) of God's existence could be at risk: if an idea can be materially false, then this raises the possibility that the idea of God can be materially false, and hence that it might not have infinite God as its cause.

However, the fact that some ideas may not contain objective reality does not really place the argument for God's existence in jeopardy. This is because, for Descartes, all clear and distinct ideas – ideas that represent a true and immutable nature – are known by inspection to have objective reality.[20] Thus, insofar as the idea of God clearly and distinctly represents an infinite substance, it must contain objec-

tive reality. (Moreover, since this idea must have a cause of formal reality at least equal to the objective reality contained in the idea, God must exist.) In sum, then, TMD does not place the Third Meditation proofs of God's existence in jeopardy. Instead, it plays a crucial role in these proofs.

God as non-deceiver

Having proven to his satisfaction that God exists in the Third Meditation, Descartes goes on to claim that the God established to exist cannot be a deceiver:

> By 'God' I mean the very being the idea of whom is within me, that is, the possessor of all the perfections I cannot grasp . . . who is subject to no defects whatsoever. It is clear enough from this that he cannot be a deceiver, since it is manifest by the natural light that all fraud and deception depend upon some defect.
>
> (AT 7: 52, CSM 2: 35)

One of the puzzles that may confront the first-time reader of the *Meditations* is the quickness with which Descartes dismisses the claim that God might be a deceiver. The dismissal seems particularly abrupt, given that he had been obviously concerned in earlier meditations by the possibility of a deceiving God (AT 7: 21, CSM 2: 14 and AT 7: 16, CSM 2: 25).

But this quick dismissal falls naturally into place on the interpretation given above. As argued, the constant theme in the Third Meditation proofs of God's existence has been the contrast between Descartes's own imperfections and the utter perfection displayed in his idea of God. By the end of these proofs, it would have been strongly impressed on the reader that the God who exists must be completely perfect. But it was also shown in TMD that defects and deficiencies are lacks of perfection. As such, God, who is completely perfect, cannot have any defect. Thus Descartes is able to claim confidently that the God who exists cannot possibly be a deceiver.

In the next chapter, I will look at how these notions established in the passage not only remain in play, but are developed in the Fourth Meditation. I will show that a tracking of how these notions develop provides for a deeper understanding of the account of human error in the Fourth and Sixth Meditations, as well as of Descartes's ethics.

5 Falsehood, Error and Ethics

Introduction

The Cartesian theodicy, and the radically voluntarist God behind it, have been the focus, severally and together, of much recent work on Descartes. This chapter approaches these topics by tracing how the account of deficiency as an absence of perfection in TMD develops in the Fourth Meditation, and how it comes to underpin Descartes's account of the theodicy in that meditation, and in particular, his account of the limits of human knowledge in a universe created by a voluntarist God. An understanding of Descartes's views on these matters will in turn be shown to cast light on Descartes's treatment of the 'errors of nature' of the Sixth Meditation, as well as crucial aspects of the ethics that he subsequently develops.

'Nothingness' in the Fourth Meditation

Before we discuss how 'nothing' contributes to the argument of the Fourth Meditation, a clarification of Descartes's use of the term 'nothing' is in order. It was argued previously that Descartes uses the term to signify an absence *of a perfection* (where such an absence carries a connotation of lack and deficiency). However, not all cases where Descartes employs the term 'nothing' would carry such a signification. For instance, consider this passage from the Synopsis of the *Meditations*:

> [S]ince some people may perhaps expect arguments for the immortality of the soul in this section, I think they should be warned here and now that I have tried to write nothing [*nihil*] that I could not accurately demonstrate . . .
>
> (AT 7: 12, CSM 2: 9)*

Here the term 'nothing' obviously does not connote an absence of perfection. What Descartes is saying here, simply, is that he has only written what he can demonstrate.

The metaphysical difference between the *nihil* in the statement above and the *nihil*/*nihilum*[1] discussed in Chapter 4 can be made clear by comparing the following statements:

S_3: There is nothing that is spherical in this room.

and

S_4: My false ideas proceed from nothing.

In S_3, what is being implied is that some mode or perfection is absent from that portion of matter denominated 'this room' *because some other mode which is incompatible with it is in its place*. That is, when I claim that there is nothing that is spherical in this room, this would imply that a particular mode (sphericality) is absent from the room simply because other modes (such as rectangularity) are present in its place. Similarly, when Descartes claims that the *Meditations* contains 'nothing that cannot be demonstrated', this is a claim that there is an absence of non-demonstrable statements in the work because other demonstrable statements are present in their place.

In contrast, in S_4, when I assert that my false ideas proceed from nothing, this would imply that these false ideas proceed from the 'pure' absence of some mode (the mode of having only clear and distinct ideas) in me. In this case, it is not because there is some other mode in its place that I lack the mode of having only clear and distinct ideas; it is just that I simply lack this mode. This 'pure' absence of this perfection is a deficiency in me (whereas the absence of sphericality is not a deficiency in that portion of matter called 'this room').

Thus, Descartes does not *always* use the term 'nothing' in the *Meditations* to signify the 'pure' absence of some mode. Rather, he *sometimes* uses the term 'nothing' in this sense. Nevertheless, a recognition that this latter sense of 'nothing' is at play in the *Meditations* would help one to understand better the argument of the *Meditations*.

Descartes and Augustine on 'nothingness'

By the end of the Third Meditation, Descartes had established the existence of a perfect, non-deceiving God. The Fourth Meditation is essentially an attempt to reconcile the perfection and non-deception of the God who created Descartes with the created Descartes as an imperfect being who constantly goes wrong. Descartes writes:

> I know by experience that there is in me a faculty of judgement which, like everything else which is in me, I certainly received from God. And since God does not wish to deceive me, he surely did not give me the kind of faculty which would ever enable me to go wrong while using it correctly.
>
> There would be no further doubt on this issue were it not that what I have just said appears to imply that I am incapable of ever going wrong. For if everything that is in me comes from God, and he did not endow me with a faculty for making mistakes, it appears that I can never go wrong . . . But . . . I know by experience that I am prone to countless errors.
>
> (AT 7: 54, CSM 2: 37–8)

Descartes finds himself confronted by a conundrum: when he considers himself as a creation of a non-deceiving God, he does not understand how he could ever be deceived or go wrong, but when he shifts his perspective and examines himself, he finds from personal experience that he is often deceived in that he goes wrong. How is he to reconcile his own errors with the fact that he is created (and sustained) by a non-deceiving God?

Descartes's first attempt to answer this question is as follows:

> On looking for the cause of [my] errors, I find that I possess not only a real and positive idea of God, or a being who is supremely perfect, but also what may be described as a negative idea of nothingness [*nihilum*] or of that which is farthest removed from all perfection. I find that I am constituted to be – as it were – a middle something between God and nothing, or between the highest being and non-being: insofar as I have been created by the highest being, there is surely nothing in me by which I would be deceived or induced to error; but insofar as I participate in some way in nothing or non-being, that is, insofar as I am not myself the supreme being, and lacking in very many things, it is no wonder that I make mistakes. I understand then that error as such is not something real which depends on God, but is merely a defect. Hence my going wrong does not require me to have a faculty bestowed upon me by God; it simply happens as a result of the fact that the faculty of true judgement which I have from God is in my case not infinite.
>
> (AT 7: 54, CSM 2: 38)*

I will call this Passage 2. To understand the claims of Passage 2, it would be helpful to turn to Augustine's position on 'nothingness'.

In *De genesi contra Manicheos*, Augustine seeks to refute the Manichaean reading of the creation, in which it is claimed that there are beings who are intrinsically evil, that are created by a negative metaphysical principle. Augustine argues that the 'absolute' nothing prior to creation is simply the absence of being before God created the universe. It is not, *pace* the Manichees, the presence of a negative kind of being, or of a negative metaphysical principle. But if there is no negative metaphysical principle of evil, and no negative being that is evil, how does one account for evil in the universe after the creation? Augustine maintains that the evil(s) in the universe after the creation are simply *particular* absences of being in that created universe. In his refutation of the Manichees, Augustine thus uses 'nothing' (both *nihil* and *nihilum*) in two senses – to mean, first, the absence of created being before God created the universe; and second, the absences of particular kinds of being in the created universe (for instance, darkness *qua* the absence of light; blindness *qua* absence of sight) (See Colish 1984: 771–3).[2]

When Descartes declares himself in Passage 2 to be a 'middle something between God and nothing', he uses 'nothing' in the first Augustinian sense. That is, he uses 'nothing' to mean the absence of all created being (prior to creation). At the point at which Passage 2 occurs, the only created being that Descartes knows to exist is himself *qua* thinker. But TMD had put in place the notion of

defect or evil as an absence of being or perfection, and Descartes had then used this notion to establish that God, who is complete perfection, exists. He had then established that God is the creator and sustainer of himself for every moment of his existence. These findings enable Descartes to claim now that he is a 'middle something between God and nothing, between highest being and non-being'. Descartes, as a finite created being, is not the supremely perfect Creator or supreme being. Again, he is also not the 'nothing' or absence of being prior to God's creation, for he is created *being*. As created being, he is thus 'midway' between supreme being and the absence of all (created) being. Descartes here adds a third notion of 'nothing' to the two discussed in the previous section. Besides the 'nothing' that signifies an absence of a perfection because some other perfection is in place, and the 'nothing' that signifies merely a *particular* 'pure' absence of perfection, there is now also the 'nothing' that signifies the absence of all (created) perfection.

Descartes goes on to argue in Passage 2 that, insofar as he is created by God, he must only be being or perfection, for God only creates being or perfection. However, as finite created being, he also falls short of God's absolute perfection and lacks many perfections. One of the perfections he lacks is error-freedom, and this is why he falls into error. Thus, he argues, his errors do not 'depend on God' (that is, are not brought about by God).

Descartes's argument here also appears to have been influenced by Augustine. As Menn points out, Augustine claims in *De Libero Arbitrio* that while corruptible natures *qua* natures are from God, the *corruption* in these natures is not from God. (Menn 1998: 304). Menn argues that Descartes clearly takes a similar tack here, in claiming that while he *qua* error-making created thinker is a creation of God, his *errors* are not from God. For Descartes, as for Augustine, the corruption and error is 'not something real' – that is, they are not real things bestowed by God, but absences of reality or perfection.

Descartes, unsurprisingly, does not find this first solution satisfactory. His own rebuttal to this solution introduces for the first time a clear distinction between a privation and a negation, which distinction will be crucial for a successful defence of Descartes's theodicy. I now turn to this rebuttal.

Privations, negations and the status of error

Descartes's rebuttal of his first solution

Descartes's rebuttal to his first solution is as follows:

> [The answer I have given] is still not entirely satisfactory. For error is not a pure negation, but rather a privation or lack of some knowledge which somehow should be in me. And when I concentrate on the nature of God, it seems impossible that he should have placed in me a faculty which is not perfect of its kind . . . The more skilled the craftsman the more perfect the work produced by him; if this is so, how can anything produced by the supreme creator of all

> things not be complete and perfect in all respects? [Yet there] is . . . no doubt that God could have given me a nature such that I was never mistaken.
>
> (AT 7: 55, CSM 2: 38)

In the Third Meditation, Descartes used the terms 'privation' and 'negation' interchangeably. Descartes in TMD described cold as (possibly) the 'privation' of heat, and, a little later, darkness as the 'negation' of light. Clearly, he did not make a distinction in the Third Meditation between the notions of negation and privation, using both of them to denote simply the absence of perfection (see AT 7: 44–6, CSM 2: 30–1). At the point of the above passage, however, Descartes has obviously made enough epistemic progress to make the distinction between the two. What does Descartes take to be the distinction between the two; and, importantly, why does Descartes think he is now, at the point of the Fourth Meditation, licensed to make it?

I answer the second question first. By the end of the Third Meditation, Descartes's adherence to the 'order of reason' has resulted in sufficient new knowledge to ground a new metaphysical distinction, on which his Fourth Meditation distinction between privation and negation will hinge. This is the distinction between absolute and relative perfections. Descartes had established by the end of the Third Meditation that the God who exists possesses the perfections of omniscience, omnipotence and so on. Insofar as these attributes are possessed by an infinite God himself to an infinite degree, they are what I shall call absolute perfections – that is, they are the supreme perfections possessed by the most perfect of things, infinite substance.

Descartes also discovers by the end of the Third Meditation that these absolute perfections are wholly *inseparable* from each other. As he writes:

> [T]he unity, the simplicity or the inseparability of all the attributes of God is one of the most important . . . perfections I understand him to have.
>
> (AT 7: 50, CSM 2: 34)

In the Second Replies, Descartes explains the nature of this unity further:

> I readily and freely confess that the idea which we have of the divine intellect . . . does not differ from that which we have of our own intellect, except insofar as the idea of an infinite number differs from a number raised to the second or fourth power. And the same applies to the individual attributes of God of which we recognize some trace in ourselves.
>
> But in addition to this . . . there is in God an absolute immensity, simplicity, and unity which embraces all other attributes and has no copy in us . . . In virtue of this, we recognize that, of all the individual attributes which, by a defect of the intellect, we assign to God in a piecemeal fashion, . . . none belong to God and to ourselves in the same sense.
>
> (AT 7: 137, CSM 2: 98)

Descartes maintains here that our understanding of God's perfections is limited by the finitude of our own intellect. We tend to perceive God's attributes as similar to

our own attributes in that they are separable (the only difference is that we think of God as possessing them to an infinite degree). But Descartes maintains that in fact the absolute perfections of God do not resemble ours in any way, for they are wholly unified, and wholly simple (in a way beyond our finite comprehension). If this is correct, then the term 'perfections of God' (in the plural) is, strictly speaking, an oxymoron. There are no separable (absolute) perfections in God. Rather God is simply and unitarily omniscience, omnipotence, immutability and so on.[3]

Thus, by the end of the Third Meditation, Descartes had established that the absolute perfections of God are wholly one, inseparable and simple. This being so, no created beings can intelligibly be said to possess any of the absolute perfections. (Any being who possessed one absolute perfection would possess all, and would be God Himself – and hence, by definition, the Creator and not a creature.) Hence, whatever perfections created beings can possess would only be (what I shall call) relative perfections. That is, such created beings could only possess 'perfections' that count as perfections *relative* to the status of their possessor as a certain type of created being.

Descartes expands further on the difference between absolute and relative perfections in the *Principles*:

> when we reflect on the idea of God which we were born with, we see that he is eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, the source of all goodness and truth, the creator of all things, and finally that he possesses within him everything in which we can clearly recognize some perfection that is infinite or unlimited by any imperfection.
>
> (AT 8A: 13, CSM 1: 200)

and again:

> There are many things such that, although we recognize some perfection in them, we also find some imperfection or limitation and these therefore cannot belong to God. For example, the nature of body includes divisibility along extension in space, and since being divisible is an imperfection, it is certain that God is not a body. Again, the fact that we perceive through the senses is for us *a perfection of a kind*; but all sense-perception involves being acted upon, and to be acted upon is to be dependent upon something else. Hence it cannot in any way be supposed that God perceives through the senses.
>
> (AT 8A: 13, CSM 2: 200–1, emphasis mine)*

For Descartes, the absolute perfection(s) that belong to God are unlimited by any imperfection (including being wholly indivisible, since divisibility is an imperfection). There are, however, other perfections that are limited by imperfections. For example, Descartes argues, the attributes of seeing and otherwise sensing are 'perfections of a kind' – that is, relative perfections. Relative to their possessor (an embodied thinking thing), the possession of these attributes would be perfections, for they would help their possessor attain the good of survival. But such

perfections are not absolute perfections. For these relative perfections presuppose imperfection: possessing the attribute of sight presupposes that one is acted upon by other substances, which implies that one lacks the absolute perfection of complete independence.

By the end of the Third Meditation, Descartes had established enough to be able to draw this distinction between absolute and relative perfections. As he has realized, the absolute perfections of God are wholly singular, and thus only belong to God. So if any perfections are possessed by created beings, they are only relative perfections – that is, perfections relative to the status of their possessor as a certain kind of created being.

In the Fourth Meditation, this (implicit) distinction between absolute and relative perfections is evident in this portion of Descartes's rebuttal of his first solution:

> [W]hen I concentrate on the nature of God, it seems impossible that he should have placed in me a faculty which is not *perfect of its kind.*
>
> (AT 7: 55, CSM 2: 38, emphasis mine)

This passage clearly assumes the metaphysical distinction between absolute and relative perfections. Descartes knows in the Fourth Meditation that God could not have created him with absolute perfections. But he argues in his rebuttal that God, who 'wills what is best', must surely have created him with a faculty that is 'perfect of its kind' (ibid.). At this stage, Descartes of course only knows that he is a finite thinker. Insofar as he is a finite thinker, he claims, it is impossible that God should not have endowed him with those relative perfections that would make him a 'complete and perfect' finite thinker (AT 7: 55, CSM 2: 38).

This distinction between absolute and relative perfections also enables Descartes to make the clear distinction between negation and privation invoked at the beginning of the rebuttal of the first solution:

> {E}rror is not a pure negation (i.e. not simply the defect or lack of perfection to which I have no claim), but rather a privation or lack of some knowledge which somehow should be in me.
>
> (AT 7: 55, CSM 2: 38, French version)*

The distinction between pure negation and privation obviously draws on the distinction between absolute and relative perfections. *Qua* finite thinker, there are some (relative) perfections to which Descartes could not possess or lay claim. One such perfection, he will make evident in the Sixth Meditation, is the perfection of possessing a certain shape or size (which is a relative perfection of body). Insofar as he is a finite thinker, the absence of such a perfection is thus a pure negation. However, *qua* finite thinker, he argues that there are certain relative perfections that 'should be in me'. As just pointed out, it seems impossible that God would not give him faculties that are 'perfect of their kind'. This being so, he should have been endowed with a faculty of gaining knowledge that never went wrong. Unfortunately, Descartes points out, he *does* go wrong. Thus, error is not just a negation – it is a *privation* in

him, for it is an absence of the perfection of error-freedom that *should* be in him, that *should* have been endowed upon him by God.

In sum, Descartes's own rebuttal of his first solution is as follows. He had argued that God could not be the cause of his errors, as God creates only being, and 'error is not something real'. Instead, his errors are accounted for by the fact that he is a finite being created by God, and, as such, lacks many perfections. But, he now points out, even if he lacks many other perfections (whose absences in him are negations), he should not lack the relative perfection of error-freedom. A God who 'wills what is best' would have given him a faculty of gaining knowledge that was perfect of its kind, so that he would not suffer the privation that is error. But he manifestly makes errors. Such errors seem to be incompatible with the existence of a God who 'wills what is best' (in other words, a God who is a non-deceiver). He is back to his original conundrum of how a non-deceiving God could exist given his errors.

In reply to his own rebuttal, Descartes offers three key arguments to show that his lack of perfection is compatible with the existence of a non-deceiving God. These three arguments form the foundation of Descartes's final resolution of the difficulties considered in the Fourth Meditation.

Before we proceed to consider these, note that Descartes's conception of privation at this point of the Fourth Meditation would differ from the common medieval conception of privation. On the latter, a privation is usually construed as an absence of a perfection that a creature should possess 'according to its nature'.[4] Aquinas, for example, writes:

> Evil is in a substance because something which it was originally to have, and which it ought to have, is lacking in it. Thus, if a man has no wings, that is not an evil for him, because he was not born to have them . . . But it is an evil if he has no hands, for these he is born to, and should, have – if he is to be perfect . . . *Every privation . . . is of that which one is born to have, and should have.*
>
> (SCG 3: 6, 1, emphasis mine)

For Aquinas, a human without hands suffers a privation, as she lacks what she should possess according to her nature. In contrast, Descartes takes a privation to be the absence of perfections that a particular kind of substance – either intellectual or material – should possess, and can 'lay claim to', given God's omnibenevolence.

One result of this definition of privation is that Descartes may be willing to accept that one can suffer a privation *because* of one's nature. For example, he had claimed in TMD that his false ideas are in him because of a deficiency or lack of perfection in his nature – the perfection in question being that of *not* having only clear and distinct ideas. Descartes, in the light of what has just transpired in the Fourth Meditation, might well accept this absence as a privation. *Qua* finite thinker, God should have endowed him with faculties that are 'perfect of their kind' – where this would include an intellect that always perceived clearly and distinctly (AT 7: 61, CSM 2: 42). The deficiency of having an intellect whose perceptions are not always clear and distinct is an essential feature of the finite human thinker's particular nature. For Descartes, one may thus suffer a privation *due to* one's nature –

insofar as one's nature *qua* finite human thinker is such that one does not possess those faculties that are 'perfect of their kind' for thinking natures.

Descartes's three responses

Descartes's arguments to support the compatibility of his lack of error freedom and the existence of a non-deceiving God tend to run into each other, involving a number of (slightly modified) revisits and reiterations of the key arguments. Nevertheless, there are, discernibly, three main arguments that Descartes puts forward. The first argument is that:

> there is no cause for surprise if I do not understand the reasons for some of God's actions; and there is no call to doubt his existence if I happen to find there are other instances where I do not grasp why or how certain things were made by him. For since I now know that my own nature is very weak and limited, whereas the nature of God is immense, incomprehensible and infinite, I also know without more ado that he is capable of countless things whose causes are beyond my knowledge.
>
> (AT 7: 55, CSM 2: 38–9)

Descartes's first argument appeals to his own finitude to argue that his imperfections are no grounds for doubting the existence of God who 'wills what is best'. This argument has been called the Epistemological Argument.[5]

The second argument that he gives is the Metaphysical Argument. In this argument, Descartes introduces teleological considerations by examining his own imperfections (*qua* finite thinker) in the context of their role or function in the larger universe. Descartes offers two different versions of the Metaphysical Argument. In the first statement of this argument, he writes:

> It also occurs to me that whenever we are inquiring whether the works of God are perfect, we ought to look at the whole universe, not just at one created thing on its own. *For what would perhaps rightly appear very imperfect if it existed on its own is quite perfect when its function as part of the universe is considered.* It is true that, since my decision to doubt everything, it is so far only myself and God whose existence I have been able to know with certainty; but after considering the immense power of God, I cannot deny that many other things have been made by him, or at least could have been made, and hence that I may have a place in the universal scheme of things.
>
> (AT 7: 55–6, CSM 2: 39, emphasis mine)

Descartes's claim here is that the imperfect finite thinker may be perfect when considered in the context of her role in the universe. This claim relies upon the following general principle:

> What is imperfect, when considered in itself, may be perfect when considered in the context of its role in the universe.

I shall call this version of the Metaphysical Argument MA1.

Towards the end of the Fourth Meditation, Descartes's re-states the argument in a somewhat different form:

> I cannot . . . deny that there may in some way be more perfection in the universe as a whole because some of its parts are not immune from error, while others are immune, than there would be if all the parts were exactly alike.
>
> (AT 7: 61, CSM 2: 42–3)

Descartes argues that the presence of the imperfect finite thinker results in greater perfection in the universe than there would have been if all finite thinkers were perfect. Again, this claim is based on the general principle:

> Particular imperfections (absences of perfection) in the universe result in the greater perfection of the overall universe.[6]

I shall call this version of the Metaphysical Argument MA2.

Despite the different claims in MA1 and MA2, both have in common that they are teleological explanations, insofar as they appeal to the function of absences of perfection in the larger universe to explain why there are such absences of perfection.

The third argument that Descartes offers is the one that has received considerable critical attention. This is the Argument from the Freedom of Will. In this argument, Descartes discovers, when he 'looks more closely' at himself, precisely how he comes to make false judgements$_p$, and so fall into error. *Qua* finite thinker, he is a combination of a finite intellect and an infinite will. He finds that he runs the risk of making false judgements$_p$ when he wills to affirm or deny those perceptions of the intellect that are confused and obscure. To avoid making such false judgements$_p$, and falling into error, Descartes concludes that he needs to refrain from affirming or denying except in cases where his perceptions are clear and distinct.

I shall now take a closer look at the Argument from the Freedom of Will, followed by the Metaphysical Argument, and finally at the Epistemological Argument. These three arguments, when put together, provide Descartes's resolution to his difficulties in the Fourth Meditation. They also provide an account of the character of the Cartesian theodicy.

The Argument from the Freedom of Will

As mentioned, this argument results from Descartes's closer inspection of himself as finite thinker, and his consequent discovery that he is a combination of a finite intellect and infinite will. Descartes finds that when the perceptions of his finite intellect are clear and distinct, he experiences a 'great inclination' in his will towards affirmation/denial. In contrast, when his perceptions are confused and obscure, his will is 'indifferent' – it may not be inclined towards either affirmation or denial, or if it is inclined towards one, may be turned in the other direction by

further considerations. If he affirms or denies under the latter circumstances, he may end up making a false judgement.

From his scrutiny of intellect and will in this argument, Descartes thus discovers how he had previously come to make false judgements, and so fall into error – namely, by misusing his will in affirmation/denial on the basis of confused and obscure perceptions. He concludes:

> In [my previous] incorrect use of free-will may be found the privation which [is] error. The privation . . . lies in the operation of the will in so far as it proceeds from me, but not in the faculty of will which I received from God, nor even in its operation, in so far as it depends on him.
>
> (AT 7: 60, CSM 2: 41)

In his earlier rebuttal, Descartes had argued that his errors are incompatible with an omnibenevolent God, who would have given him faculties that are 'perfect of their kind'. Now, Descartes argues that his errors do not in fact militate against the omnibenevolence of God. This is because God did in fact endow him with a faculty of free will that is 'perfect of its kind'. (As he goes on to write, 'the will . . . which I experience within me [is] so great that the idea of any greater faculty is beyond my grasp' [AT 7: 57, CSM 2: 40].) Instead, any 'privation' of error-freedom that he suffers stems from his *own* deficiency or lack of perfection, when he misuses the faculty of free will received from God.

The 'solution' offered here may enable Descartes to avoid making errors in the future. However, it is scarcely effective as an answer to the original difficulty, as Descartes himself subsequently acknowledges. This is because the faculty of free will endowed upon him by God may indeed be 'perfect of its kind', but the same is by no means true of his intellect, which is 'extremely slight' and 'very finite' (AT 7: 57, CSM 2: 40). Descartes himself points out that an omnibenevolent God could surely have endowed him with not only a perfect-of-its-kind free will, but a similarly perfect intellect blessed with only clear and distinct perceptions (AT 7: 61, CSM 2: 42) The argument here does not offer a satisfactory answer to the *original* conundrum – why an omnibenevolent God did not provide him with faculties that are (all) 'perfect of their kind'.

While this argument taken alone is not a satisfactory solution to Descartes's theodical difficulties, it forms part of the larger answer that Descartes provides in resolving these difficulties. To obtain the larger answer, we need to look at the remaining two arguments.

The Metaphysical Argument

We have seen earlier how Descartes adopts Augustine's stance that evil in the universe is simply the absence of perfection or being, and not negative being. But Augustine also argued that such absences of perfection have their role to play in the context of the larger universe. Colish points to how he uses the example of silence to help illustrate his position on this issue:

> Silence [for Augustine] can mean simply the absence of sound of any kind. But *silentium* also refers specifically to the musical rest punctuating a musical phrase, which facilitates the performer's production of his song and the listener's intellectual appropriation of it. While musical rests . . . signify the absence or cessation of musical sound, they nonetheless have a vital role to play in the rhetoric of music: 'Indeed, they are ordered well by those who understand the art of singing, and they contribute something to the sweetness of the whole song'.
>
> (Colish 1984: 773)

Augustine maintains that, just as the absence of silence contributes to the perfection of the song, so do the absences of perfection in the universe contribute to the overall perfection of the universe:

> The privation signified by such relative nouns as *silentium*, *umbra* and *tenebrae* is in no sense an evil *aliquid* [since all evils are *absences* of perfections]. These [absences], like the creatures that may seem nasty, harmful or useless to the unenlightened, *all have a positive value to the cosmic order and make a contribution to the completeness of the whole*.
>
> (ibid., emphasis mine)

Descartes's Metaphysical Argument (in both its versions) apparently draws from Augustine's position on the same issue. Recall that MA1 was based on the principle that:

> What is imperfect, when considered in itself, may be perfect when considered in the context of its role in the universe.

and MA2 was based on a somewhat different principle:

> Particular imperfections (absences of perfection) in the universe result in the greater perfection of the overall universe.

I will look at MA2 first. Commentators have sometimes puzzled over Descartes's claim in MA2 that absences of perfection can contribute to make the universe have more perfection overall. In what way would absences of perfection make the universe more perfect? Clearly, the absences of perfection do not make the universe as a whole have more perfection in an *additive* sense. Taken additively, a universe with minimal or no absences of perfection (for example, a universe in which all beings would have faculties that are the most perfect of their kind) would have greater overall perfection than one with more absences of perfection (such as the present universe with its error-prone thinkers). This is because the *total sum* of perfection in the former would be greater than that in the latter.

Commentators sometimes appeal to the 'principle of plenitude', arguing that Descartes thought that a universe in which there is diversity would have greater

perfection than one in which everything was alike. However, this principle needs more careful consideration. One way of reading the principle is to construe it as claiming that plenitude and diversity *per se* result in the greater perfection of the universe.[7] There is certainly some textual basis for this construal, since Descartes claims that there may be more perfection in the universe 'because some of its parts are not immune from error, while others are immune, *than there would be if all the parts were exactly alike*'.

But there is a difficulty with this reading of the principle. While Descartes may well accept that plenitude and diversity are contributory factors to increased perfection in the universe, it cannot be that he thinks that mere plenitude and diversity *per se* would suffice to increase overall perfection of the universe. If they did, then a universe that has *much more* diversity than the present created universe, constituted of a much greater variety of kinds, would obviously be more perfect than the current one. Why did God not then create a universe with even more multifarious variety?

One can put what is at issue here another way. A universe with diversity and difference may well be more perfect than one of boring sameness – but how *much* diversity is needed to increase overall perfection? And is diversity the *only* feature that would contribute to the increased perfection of the universe?

An answer to these and other similar puzzles is offered if one assumes that Descartes adopted Augustine's position on how absences of perfection contribute to the greater perfection of the overall whole.[8] In what follows, I outline how absences of perfection contribute to the greater perfection of the whole in Augustine's view, and argue that Descartes is likely to have followed Augustine on this point.

Notice first that the analogy that Augustine uses to establish that absences of perfection may contribute to the overall perfection of the universe – that of how a particular silence may contribute to the overall perfection of a song – draws on *aesthetic* considerations to make its point. The silence contributes to the overall perfection of the song because it contributes to the 'sweetness' of the whole song. In another analogy to make the same point, Augustine points out that the blanks and absences in a picture exist in the context of a wider order in the picture, and have a place within that order. The absences in such cases enhance the beauty and harmony of the overall whole, and the discerning viewer will recognize that they add to her viewing pleasure. Similarly, Augustine argues, the absences of perfection in the created universe would contribute to the harmonious and satisfying order of the universe. That is, absences contribute to the overall perfection of the universe insofar as such absences have their place in the larger overall order, and in inhabiting that place, contribute to the overall harmony and beauty of the order.

One important advantage of this position is that it explains why there cannot be *more* diversity in the universe than is already there. This is because any further alteration in the absences or beings within that order would result in a *decrease* in the harmony and beauty of the overall order. (We can compare this to a painting, where an addition of dots or colours, or even an alteration in the placement of such dots or colours, would result in a less perfect painting.) On this view, diversity and plenitude *per se* do not make the universe more perfect. Rather, what makes the universe as a whole more perfect is specific (and limited) kinds of diversity (entailing specific

and limited kinds of absences of perfection), insofar as these occur in the context of a unified overall whole, and have a function in enhancing the perfection of the whole.

If we see Descartes as adopting a similar position to Augustine's, we can make good sense of his claim that absences contribute to the greater perfection of the universe. Insofar as Descartes does appeal to the principle of plenitude, he does not construe this to mean that plenitude *per se* increases the overall perfection of the universe. Rather, this principle (as he understands it) involves the claim that a (limited) variety of particular absences would make the universe more perfect (as the limited and particular blanks on a canvas make a picture more beautiful).

MA1 can also be made sense of on the assumption that Descartes accepts something like Augustine's account. MA1 is based on the principle that:

> What is imperfect, when considered in itself, may be perfect when considered in the context of its role in the universe.

Augustine had argued that, when we consider the silence that occurs in a song, we have to look at the place it occupies within the context of the entire song. Now when it is considered in this way, the silence that is merely absence of sound considered in itself would be wholly perfect (that is, absolutely appropriate) within the larger context of the song being rendered. Similarly, what may lack perfection, when considered in itself, could be perfect (wholly appropriate) when considered in the larger context of the universe. Note that this is *precisely* what Descartes assumes in MA1. As he points out, he, *qua* imperfect thinker, may indeed lack perfection considered in himself, but could be perfect within in the larger context of the universe as a whole. MA1 thus makes sense if we assume that Descartes adopted a position like Augustine's.

The claims in Descartes's Metaphysical Argument can thus be understood by reference to Augustine's earlier treatment of absences of perfection, and their role in the universe. However, as Calvert notes, one difficulty with the Cartesian version of the Metaphysical Argument is that it is in tension with the clear injunction of the *Meditations* that we should strive to attain the perfection of error-freedom, at least in epistemic matters (Calvert 1972: 125).

Augustine had argued that evil, which is the absence of being or perfection, also contributes to the perfection or completeness of the universe. Thus, even nasty or harmful creatures contribute positively to the cosmic order. Descartes argues in a similar strain when he maintains that imperfect creatures like himself, in whom faculties that are 'perfect of their kind' are absent, would also contribute to the greater perfection of the universe. However, if the absence of (relative) perfect faculties contributes to the greater perfection of the universe, why should the absence of error-freedom *itself* not also contribute to the greater perfection of the universe? Surely, one can claim that errors, insofar as they are *absences*, would also contribute to the perfection of the universe, in the same way that other kinds of evil do. Why then should we bother to strive for freedom from error, or for what Descartes would take to be its moral equivalent, freedom from sin?[9] To see how Descartes deals with this question, we need to turn to the Epistemological Argument.

The Epistemological Argument

The Epistemological Argument, like the other two arguments, offers a response to Descartes's question of why God did not create him, *qua* finite thinker, with faculties that are 'perfect of their kind'. In the Epistemological Argument, Descartes replies that although he does not know 'the reasons for some of God's actions', this is not a reason for doubting his existence. This is because he now knows that his own nature is 'very weak and limited', whereas the nature of God is 'immense, incomprehensible and infinite' (AT 7: 55, CSM 2: 38–9).

Having established in TMD the notion of deficiency as the absence of perfection, Descartes had gone on to contrast his lack of perfection with God's absolute perfection. As mentioned, he had then discovered the absolute simplicity of God, such that all God's attributes are one, in a way that he *qua* finite thinker cannot comprehend. In the Epistemological Argument, he reiterates, not just the infinitude and immensity of God, but importantly, the *incomprehensibility* of God to the finite thinker that follows from such infinitude and immensity. This incomprehensibility extends to God's inscrutable purposes, of which Descartes states that 'there is considerable rashness in thinking' that one can investigate them (AT 7: 55, CSM 2: 39). Thus, there may be a divine order of which he is a part, as the Metaphysical Argument claims. However, Descartes *qua* finite thinker can never comprehend the workings of this larger divine order.

What is significant about the Epistemological Argument is that it introduces the presence of a distinction between two points of view – the divine and the finite thinker's. The Epistemological Argument stresses that the finite thinker can never have access to the divine point of view – that is, can never know things as God knows them. This being so, the question of why God created him as an imperfect finite thinker is not one that admits of any answer that the finite thinker could have access to.

Descartes reprises the Epistemological Argument after the Argument from the Freedom of Will. Significantly, he claims in this reprise that when the privation of error 'is referred to God as its cause, it should not be called a privation but simply a negation' (AT 7: 61, CSM 2: 42). Descartes had earlier claimed that a negation is a lack of a (relative) perfection to which he could lay no claim, while a privation is a lack of relative perfection that he should possess (given God's benevolence). He now points out that the *same* lack of perfection could be both. Considered in relation to himself, his errors are a privation of that which he can lay claim to and should possess. Considered in relation to God, the errors are merely negations – absences of the perfection of error-freedom to which he can lay no claim.

To understand properly why these errors are negations when considered in relation to God, let us go to the Third Set of Replies. In his response there to Hobbes, Descartes acknowledges that God foreordains the happenings in the universe (AT 7: 191, CSM 2: 134). Thus, when God created Descartes as an imperfect thinker, God would have ordained him to make his individual errors at the points that he did. In the Metaphysical Argument, Descartes had accepted that there is a divine order

created by God. Descartes's individual errors thus take place in a fore-ordained divine order created by a God 'who wills what is best'. When considered in relation to God as the Creator of the best possible universe, it makes no sense to claim that these errors are *privations* – lacks of error-freedom that Descartes should have possessed or can lay claim to, given God's benevolence. Thus, insofar as omnibenevolent God would have willed the best possible universe, and Descartes's individual errors occurred in this universe, such individual errors must be classed as *negations* (that is, as absences of perfections that he could not lay claim to, nor expect to possess).

Again, considered in relation to God as Creator, these individual errors could also not have been 'privations' stemming from Descartes's own misuse of free will. Given that the errors have been predestined by God to occur at the point they did, it makes no sense to claim that Descartes could have avoided them by the proper exercise of his free will, or that he could have *striven* to achieve error-freedom in these cases. Such errors thus cannot be absences of the perfection of error-freedom that Descartes *could*, and *should*, have possessed. These errors must be considered as negations.

Further, it is not only the finite thinker's individual errors, but all other absences of perfection, that must be taken to be negations when considered in relation to God. As mentioned, these absences of perfection are part of a wider order that is fixed – past, present and future – by God. Thus, imperfect finite thinkers, famines, cases of blindness and error all form part of this divine order. Considered in relation to God, such absences of perfection are negations – lacks of various perfections (perfect thinkers, abundance, sight, error-freedom and so on) that one cannot 'lay claim to'. Just as Descartes accepts that it is 'no imperfection in God' to have made him an imperfect finite thinker whose faculties are such that they render him liable to error (AT 7: 61, CSM 2: 42), so it is no imperfection in God to have created a universe with famines and cases of blindness.

The main point of the Epistemological Argument, however, is that Descartes can never comprehend how things are in relation to infinite God. That is, Descartes can never comprehend the role of the various divine negations – including his own epistemic errors – in contributing to further the ultimate perfection of the universe. Indeed, at a deeper level, he cannot even comprehend how such errors *could* be negations in a God-ordained universe: such errors, the Fourth Meditation makes clear, involve the misuse of free will – but how could freely willed errors even *occur* in a universe in which everything is ordained by God?

Descartes's attitude towards the problem of free will in a predestined universe is indicative of his general attitude towards the incomprehensible divine order. In the *Principles*, he ruefully acknowledges that the finite thinker can never 'get a sufficient grasp of [divine preordination] to see how it leaves the free actions of men undetermined' (AT 8A: 20, CSM 1: 206). However, he maintains that:

> We have such close awareness of the freedom . . . which is in us, that there is nothing we can grasp . . . more perfectly. And it would be absurd, simply

> because we do not grasp one thing, which we know must by its very nature be beyond our comprehension, to doubt something else of which we have an intimate grasp and which we experience within ourselves.
>
> (ibid.)

Descartes thinks that we can never grasp how free will can be reconciled with divine predestination, but should not be concerned about this. We know from our own experience that we have free will, and that is enough for us.

More generally, Descartes thinks that we can never comprehend the wider divine order, but should not be concerned about this. Accepting that the divine order is wholly inaccessible, he determines, as Boros argues, that 'we are entitled to evaluate things or events in nature *only insofar as they relate to us and not insofar as they depend on God*' (Boros 2001: 145, emphasis mine). That is, Descartes thinks that we should only be concerned about the states or events of this order as they present themselves to our finite human perspective.

From this finite human perspective, it is evident that we can, and do, deem certain absences to be privations of perfections or goods that *should* have been there. For instance, the Fourth Meditation makes clear that, considered in relation to ourselves as finite thinkers, epistemic error is a privation – the lack of a perfection that we *qua* imperfect finite thinkers recognize that we should possess (and that we know from experience we can achieve through the proper use of our will). Later, when the external world has been reinstated and his own embodiment established, Descartes will also include among the privations of an embodied thinker absences such as blindness or deafness. (That absences such as blindness would count as a privation for [embodied] thinkers is evident from the reply to Hobbes mentioned in Chapter 3, in which Descartes claims that blindness is a defect in the embodied thinker, 'although the mere fact that stones are incapable of vision does not make us call them blind' [AT 7: 191, CSM 2: 134]. Descartes evidently holds that blindness is the lack of a perfection (sight) that should be possessed by a finite embodied thinker, though it is not a perfection that stones can have.)

In short, when we consider matters from our finite point of view, some lacks of perfection may be counted as privations. Some of these privations are recognizably beyond our control (for instance, we cannot help being born blind or with error-prone faculties) while others are not (for example, freedom from epistemic error is attainable through the correct use of free will). As I shall show later, the Cartesian good life consists in trying to attain such perfections as are within our control, while accepting those privations that are not.

Descartes's three responses reconsidered

We are now in a position to reconsider Descartes's theodical difficulties, and to examine how his three responses may be put together to provide a resolution to them. In the Fourth Meditation, Descartes argues that the fact that he was not created as a being that is 'perfect of its kind' seems to be incompatible with the existence of a God who 'wills what is best' (that is, a God who is a non-deceiver).

Descartes's argument that his own imperfection does not militate against an existing, non-deceiving God is as follows. At the point of the Fourth Meditation, Descartes only knows God and himself *qua* finite thinker to exist. The Metaphysical Argument is introduced to intimate that Descartes may be part of a much wider divine order, with a role to play within that order. His imperfection may contribute to the greater perfection of that order. The Epistemological Argument makes clear that, *qua* finite thinker, he cannot comprehend the wider order, or his role within it. Since he cannot inhabit the divine point of view, he cannot understand God's purposes in making him imperfect and prone to error (or even how such error can be freely willed within that order). Thus, Descartes can only evaluate the order of the universe as it relates to himself – that is, from his own finite point of view. From this finite perspective, he recognizes error to be the absence of a perfection that he could possess, and should work towards. The Argument from the Freedom of Will outlines what he can do to avoid the privation that is error.

Seen in this context, Descartes's account of 'nothing' as an absence of reality or perfection in TMD is not only the starting point from which he establishes the existence of God. When developed further, it underpins Descartes's account of the theodicy, and delimits the scope of finite knowledge within that theodicy. In the Fourth Meditation, the 'nothing' that is a 'pure' absence of particular perfection is further divided into two classes – negations (absences of perfection to which a subject can lay no claim) and privations (absences of perfection that a subject should possess given God's omnibenevolence). Descartes then points out that the *same* absence of perfection (error, blindness and so on) can be a negation in relation to God, and a privation in relation to ourselves. The distinguishing of divine from finite perspective then enables Descartes to point out that we should focus on things 'as they relate to ourselves', and look into how we may avoid error.

While the three arguments may seem to intertwine neatly to provide a resolution to Descartes's theodical difficulties, there are still issues left to resolve. As I maintained, the Epistemological Argument introduces two points of view – the divine and the finite – and establishes that Descartes can never know things as God 'knows' them. It is this recognition that leads Descartes to conclude that he should concern himself only with things as they are from his finite human point of view.

But this argument seems to undercut Descartes's Metaphysical Argument. If, as he claims, the divine order is wholly inscrutable, how could he even claim, as he does in the Metaphysical Argument, that there is a divine *order*, such that every item in the universe has its function within this order? Perhaps the universe is not orderly. Or again, perhaps the universe is orderly, but the order is not teleological, so that every item has its function within the overall whole. Again, Descartes thinks that the absences in this divine order are to be understood by reference to the absences (silences, blanks on the canvas) in a work of art. The teleology of the universe is to be understood by the teleology in a work of art. But how can Descartes maintain that the divine order is to be understood in (quasi)-aesthetic terms if this divine order lies beyond finite comprehension (to such an extent that he cannot reconcile error as a divine negation within this order with error as a privation that stems from the misuse of free will)? In the next section, I deal with this

question by examining the sense in which Descartes takes God to be incomprehensible, and then bring this to bear on the incomprehensibility of the divine order.

The incomprehensibility of God and the divine order

The incomprehensibility of the Cartesian God has received some close attention recently (see, for instance, Marion 1981 and 1999b, Devillairs 1998). This incomprehensibility is closely tied to Descartes's much-discussed views on divine omnipotence. In the Cartesian God, will and intellect are one and wholly inseparable, and Descartes wrote to Mersenne that 'from eternity [God] willed . . . [the eternal truths] and by that very fact he created them' (AT 1: 152, CSMK: 25). The Cartesian God is radically voluntarist, and Descartes holds that God willed, and hence created, those truths that humans accept as (necessary) truths of reason. Accordingly, he accepts that God need not have created these truths to be such as they are.[10]

The terms and concepts that we possess within our finite framework only have application or make sense on the assumption that laws such as the principle of contradiction hold. But this principle (in common with other laws of logic) is among the truths of reason willed by God, and God need not have willed this principle:

> God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore . . . he could have done the opposite.
>
> (AT 4: 118, CSMK: 235)

Given that such laws of logic are willed by God and thereafter govern creation, including our human ways of thinking, it would follow that our human terms and concepts could have no application outside our finite human point of view. How then could we coherently think and talk about God, who, as the creator of these principles, must lie beyond the finite point of view governed by such principles?

There are quite a number of passages in which Descartes claims that we can somehow 'know' God without fully comprehending God. Descartes acknowledges that he can never have an *adequate* grasp of God and God's perfections. As he points out, 'a finite mind cannot grasp God, who is infinite' (AT 7: 210, CSM 2: 273). Nevertheless, he adds,

> that does not prevent [the finite thinker] having a perception of God, just as one can touch a mountain without being able to put one's arms around it.
>
> (ibid.)

For Descartes, the finite thinker will never be able to comprehend God as God actually is, for this would involve inhabiting the infinite point of view. Nevertheless, Descartes holds that we can apprehend God (and God's attributes) from a finite perspective. Moreover, a clear and distinct finite apprehension of God is sufficient for the thinker to establish that God exists:

> When it is said that God 'cannot be thought of', this refers to the kind of thought that has an adequate grasp of God, not to the inadequate thought which we possess, and *which is quite sufficient for knowledge of the existence of God.*
> (AT 7: 140, CSM 2: 100, emphasis mine)

Descartes here accepts that an adequate grasp of God lies beyond the capability of the finite thinker. Nevertheless, our finite clear and distinct apprehension of God is sufficient to establish the existence of God for us (*qua* finite thinkers).

Now one result of our limited and inadequate apprehension of infinite God is that when we use our terms and descriptions to apply to God, these terms are not univocal with the same terms applied to finite beings. It has been pointed out that the terms 'understanding' and 'will' are not univocal with respect to God and humans (see, for example, Devillairs 1998: 13). Where human will and intellect are separable (the one infinite and the other finite), God's will and intellect are, as just mentioned, one (and utterly infinite). Again, the freedom of indifference is the lowest form of freedom of will for humans, but in God, it is perfection. It is evident that 'understanding' and 'will' do not have the same meaning when applied to God and humans.

That there is no univocity in the same term applied to God and man is reinforced by the Second Set of Replies. As mentioned earlier, Descartes points out there that the attributes of the absolutely simple God are single and unitary, though we by virtue of our finitude can only conceive of them as *separate* attributes. Thus, the terms 'power' and 'knowledge' as applied to God and humans is not univocal. We are able to comprehend perfectly what 'power' or 'knowledge' is with respect to finite humans, having experienced it within ourselves (AT 7: 47–8, CSM 2: 32–3). In contrast, we may well be able to form a certain apprehension of divine power by reference to our own finite powers. But such apprehension only 'touches' or points to actual divine power (mysteriously unified with the other divine attributes). We can never fully comprehend it.

We may bring these points to bear on Descartes's claims about the divine order. As is the case with God, Descartes would accept that we can never have an adequate grasp of the divine order. This does not prevent us from having a finite apprehension of that order, in the same way that we have a finite apprehension of God's attributes. Just as we can apprehend or 'know' God's power in terms of our own individuated power, so we can apprehend or 'know' the divine order in terms of the aesthetic orders of our finite experience. Such apprehension is possible even though we cannot fully comprehend the nature of divine power or the divine order.

However, this resolution to the difficulty may face the following objection. Descartes's account of how we apprehend God and the divine order seems to assume we can have *some* grasp – albeit an inadequate one – of God and the divine order. We *can* know God while not comprehending God entirely (just as we can touch a mountain while not enfolding it). But I have argued earlier that, given Descartes's views on divine omnipotence, our various concepts and terms can get no grip beyond the finite human point of view, which is ordered by the necessary truths of reason. This being so, the terms 'God' and 'divine order' can have no application except within

our finite point of view. How then can Descartes claim that we, *qua* finite thinkers, are able to point to or 'touch' what lies beyond this perspective? The claim by Descartes that we have (only) an 'inadequate' grasp of God seems specious: it suggests we have an *imperfect* grasp of God, whereas in fact we can have *no* grasp at all.

This objection receives added force from Marion's accomplished argument that Descartes thinks God is *precisely* what is wholly ungraspable and incomprehensible. Marion maintains that 'God the infinite is not known despite his incomprehensibility but through it' (Marion 1999b: 231). It is in recognizing God as what lies wholly beyond our human comprehension that we know God:

> Incomprehensibility will . . . become the surest sign that it is indeed God that the *cogitatio* knows, in accordance with the rule that nothing divine can be thought except as incomprehensible . . .
>
> (Marion 1999b: 232)

That God is known to the finite thinker as what is *wholly* ungraspable by her is incompatible with the claim that the finite thinker can have an inadequate grasp of God (and the divine order) by reference to our own human faculties (and orders).

But I think the difficulty can be resolved as follows. Consider carefully Descartes's claim that we have an 'inadequate grasp' of, say, God's infinite power by reference to our own finite powers. Descartes would point out that our conception of divine power by reference to the finite is *all that we can have* as finite thinkers. We cannot comprehend precisely the extent to which this inadequate grasp measures up to, or falls short of, an adequate grasp. We cannot in any way get beyond this inadequate grasp to determine its inadequacies. This being the case, all that we mean by an 'inadequate grasp' of God's power is the apprehension that we, *qua* finite thinkers, form of God's infinite power.

Descartes may acknowledge that there is an order or perspective beyond the finite – but he continually stresses that there is no way we can get beyond our finite perspective. In the Second Set of Replies, he replies thus to the objection that our clear and distinct perceptions may be false 'absolutely speaking':

> What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God . . . so that it is, absolutely speaking, false? Why should this alleged 'absolute falsity' bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it?
>
> (AT 7: 145, CSM 2: 103)

Descartes maintains here that we need not concern ourselves with what might or might not be beyond 'how things are to us'. Thus, it is indeed the case that any attempt to transcend the finite point of view will result in the stark acknowledgement that God is utterly incomprehensible to the finite thinker, insofar as the infinite 'point of view' must perforce be beyond her mental reach. But what is important for Descartes is to found, within the *finite* order, a system of knowledge

that is 'stable and likely to last' (AT 7: 17, CSM 2: 12). And for the latter, what is needed is that we have clear and distinct perceptions *qua* finite thinkers, which would form the basis of our infallibly true (finite) judgements. These would include the clear and distinct perceptions we have of God and (arguably) the divine order. Descartes points out that we have our 'inadequate' grasp of God and the divine order – by which he simply means that we have a (clear and distinct) apprehension of God and the divine order relative to our finite point of view.[11] This is all we need for knowledge as finite thinkers, and also all we can have for knowledge as finite thinkers. In recognizing this, we recognize the boundaries of finite thought and knowledge.

Descartes's position here can be used to answer an objection that has been raised with respect to his project in the Fourth Meditation. It has sometimes been argued that the Cartesian God's absolute liberty to create as he chooses undercuts this project of reconciling human imperfection with a non-deceiving God (who 'wills what is best'). The claim that God cannot deceive 'presupposes that God's goodness places real constraints upon his actions, and hence that his power is not absolute' (Tierno 1997: 76). But the Cartesian God's absolute freedom entails that God is the creator of the standards of goodness and justice (see, for example, AT 7: 432, CSM 2: 291, and also Devillairs 1998: 7). Thus, God need not have created the standards of good and evil that he did. This being so, God's willings are not subject to any moral constraints. How then can Descartes's Fourth Meditation claim that the Cartesian God is a God who 'wills what is best' be a coherent one?

This objection can be answered in the light of what I have argued above. For Descartes, God is indeed absolutely free in a way that lies beyond our finite mind (which can only comprehend within the laws of logic and standards of goodness 'inborn in our minds'). Nevertheless, Descartes's Fourth Meditation project is an intelligible one – *when one recognizes that it is located within the finite point of view*. From this point of view, we clearly and distinctly perceive (according to the standards of goodness that God wills) that God is a non-deceiver who 'wills what is best'. We also know, from our own finite experience, that our faculties are imperfect and prone to error. There is thus a need to reconcile this clear and distinct finite perception of God's omnibenevolence with our own experienced human imperfection. Descartes's solution in the Fourth Meditation is to point out that our perceived difficulties in reconciling God's goodness and our imperfection come about *precisely* because we are looking at things from a finite perspective. As finite beings, we must recognize that there are questions concerning God and the theodicy whose satisfactory resolution lies beyond this finite comprehension. Such questions would include the tension between preordination and free will, or the tension between a God who wills what is best and our imperfect faculties.[12] Instead of attempting to grasp adequately what 'we must know by its very nature [to] be beyond our comprehension' (AT 8A: 20, CSM 1: 206), we have to be content with what our finite (clear and distinct) grasp of God 'who wills what is best', and our own experiential knowledge of our freedom and imperfections, allow. That is, and must be recognized to be, all that we can have.

The 'errors of nature' in the Sixth Meditation

Alison Simmons has ably shown that teleological explanations play a key role in Descartes's Sixth Meditation. There, Descartes knows himself to be, not just a finite thinker, but an embodied finite thinker. It is in virtue of this embodiment that he is able to have sensory (and imaginative) perceptions. Simmons argues that a key aim of the Sixth Meditation is then to establish that sensory perceptions have 'their own job to do in the life of the human being', and that they make a crucial contribution towards the end of the continued survival of the embodied thinker. (Simmons 2001: 53) However, Simmons suggests that Descartes is not overly concerned with what she calls 'divine teleology', by which she means 'the attribution of ends to God, and in particular to God's creative acts' (Simmons 2001: 64). Such concern with divine teleology must be ruled out by, *inter alia*, Descartes's oft-iterated position that we can never penetrate the inscrutable purposes of God. However, I argue here that the Sixth Meditation at least *raises* issues that relate to divine teleology, and that Descartes deals with them using the framework established in the Fourth Meditation (though his ultimate conclusion, admittedly, is that we should not be too concerned with divine teleology).

Descartes on his nature and its errors

In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes establishes that a corporeal world exists. The putative wider order suggested in the Fourth Meditation is thus now a reality in the Sixth Meditation. Given that this is the case, Descartes now offers the following definitions of 'nature':

> [I]f nature is considered in its general aspect, then I understand by the term . . . the ordered system of created things established by God. And by my own nature in particular I understand nothing other than the totality of things bestowed on me by God.
>
> (AT 7: 80, CSM 2: 56)

Descartes states here that nature in general is the divine order established by God, and his own nature is the totality of things or perfections he has received from God.

He then considers his own nature a little further. He finds that, *qua* finite thinker, he is united with a particular stretch of the corporeal world known as his 'body'. In virtue of this embodiment, he has 'confused' sensations, where these are both external (colour, tastes and so on) as well as internal (hunger, thirst and so on)

Descartes explicitly emphasizes that such sensations are 'confused modes of thinking' (AT 7: 81, CSM 2: 56). Such 'sensations' must therefore belong to the third, and not the second grade, of sensory response. As we have seen, Descartes accepts in the *Principles* that sensations of the second grade can be perceived clearly and distinctly, provided they are separated from obscure judgements$_q$ that occur at the third grade. A 'confused' sensation of hunger or heat must occur in the *third grade* of sensory response, and include an additional (obscure) judgement$_q$ to the effect that it would be beneficial to eat or to draw away from the heat. (In the Fourth

Set of Replies, Descartes is more precise in his terminological usage, carefully specifying that he is concerned in the Sixth Meditation with the '*ideas* which arise from the *sensations* of appetite' [AT 7: 234, CSM 2: 164, emphases mine].)

Descartes considers the various errors that he makes, in the context of his embodiment. He points out that he has been wont to use his 'sensations' (that is, his third-grade sensory responses) to make affirmations or denials about 'things located outside me'. In doing this, he has been 'misusing the order of nature'. 'The proper purpose' of such 'sensations' (that is, ideas based on second-grade sensations) is not to enable us to attain knowledge of things as they really are. Instead, it is 'simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part' (AT 7: 83, CSM 2: 57).

Descartes's treatment of his errors here is entirely in line with his treatment of them in the Fourth Meditation. The Fourth Meditation had made clear that the order of nature established by God is such that we, *qua* human thinkers, have a finite and error-prone intellect, and an infinite will. We then 'misuse' the 'order of nature' when we carelessly affirm or deny on the basis of less than distinct perceptions, and it is this misuse that brings about our errors. In this connection, Descartes now writes, many of our gravest errors come about when we misuse our will (and the 'order of nature') by making judgements$_p$ about 'things located outside us' on the basis of our confused (third-grade) 'sensations'.

Descartes then explores the role of third-grade 'sensations' in promoting the embodied thinker's survival and well-being. Such 'sensations' (that is, third-grade ideas$_m$) are there to enable our true judgements$_p$ about what is beneficial or harmful to the embodied thinker. Thus, my third-grade idea of thirst (or need for drink) enables to me to affirm that I need a drink, where such drink is beneficial to my well-being as a mind–body composite. These third-grade responses, Descartes maintains, are natural and spontaneous – in other words, we are inclined by nature to form such perceptions (that is, such judgements$_q$) under the appropriate circumstances. (For example, we are naturally inclined to form the third-grade idea of thirst when our body needs water.) Importantly, Descartes holds that we need to act on the basis of these 'natural inclinations' despite the fact that they are 'confused'.

For Descartes, there is a crucial difference between perceptions about what is beneficial or harmful to us and perceptions about the nature of things located outside us. In the latter case, Descartes requires that we do not affirm or deny until we are certain that the perception is clear and distinct and irresistibly impels our assent. In the former, however, we do not have the luxury of time before making the requisite affirmation or denial, since our survival depends on making these affirmations/denials promptly, and then acting on them. In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes writes:

> Since in everyday life we must often act without delay, it is a most certain truth that when it is not in our power to discern the truest opinions, we must follow the most probable. Even when no opinions appear more probable than any others, we must still adopt some; and having done so we must regard them not as doubtful, from a practical point of view, but as most true and certain.
>
> (AT 6: 25, CSMI: 123)

In matters pertaining to daily life (which includes matters pertaining to the survival and well-being of the mind–body composite), we must judge, and act upon that judgement, even when the perception in question is not known for certain to be true.

This being the case, Descartes argues, one might expect a God 'who wills what is best' to have created us such that our (third-grade) internal and external sense-perceptions concerning what is beneficial or harmful are wholly reliable, so that the prompt judgements$_p$ that are based on them would always be true. Unfortunately, Descartes points out, there is ample evidence that these third-grade ideas are ineliminably 'confused' – they are never 100 percent reliable.

Descartes considers first the example where 'someone is tricked by the pleasant taste of some food into eating the poison concealed inside it' (AT 7: 83–4, CSM 2: 58). In that case, the person's natural third-grade 'sensation' about the pleasantness (and hence edibility) of the food has apparently misled him into making a false judgement$_p$. How can this be reconciled with a Creator who 'wills what is best'?

Descartes dismisses such examples by pointing out that they are consonant with a God 'who wills what is best':

> [I]n this case, what the man's nature urges him to go for is simply what is responsible for the pleasant taste, and not the poison which his nature knows nothing about.
>
> (ibid.)

The person's affirmation that he should eat the (tasty) food is based on his natural third-grade idea of a particular taste as pleasant, and he eats it because he *lacks knowledge* about the poison in the food. Thus, the man's mistake comes about because he is (as established in the Fourth Meditation) an imperfect and finite thinker. The error is not to be traced to his natural disposition to form a particular third-grade 'sensation' of taste.

But now Descartes points out that there *are* cases in which a person's natural disposition to form certain sensory responses does lead her astray. One example is the patient with dropsy who forms a natural (third-grade) 'sensation' of thirst, when in fact a drink would be to the detriment of her well-being (and perhaps survival). This patient would have a natural disposition to form a 'sensation' that would lead her astray. How could this disposition be compatible with the existence of a God who 'wills what is best'?

Descartes's attempt to grapple with this latter difficulty (found in AT 7: 84–9; CSM 2: 58–61) evidently appeals to the difference between the finite perspective of the imperfect human thinker, and the infinite perspective of God that had been put in place in the Fourth Meditation. Descartes begins by suggesting an analogy between the sick (dropsical) human and a badly made clock, which fails to perform its function of telling its time. The badly made clock 'departs from its nature' when it does not fulfil the purpose for which it was intended. Similarly, the dropsical human being (or more precisely, the body of the dropsical human) 'departs from its nature' when it does not fulfil the purpose for which it was intended (the continued

survival and well-being of the embodied thinker). Thus, the misleading idea of thirst in the dropsical human is explained by pointing out that such a sick human is a defective one, who has 'departed from her nature'.

Descartes rejects this answer. He points out that 'nature' as just employed 'has a very different significance' from 'nature' used in another sense (AT 7: 85, CSM 2: 59). As just used, the 'nature of X' refers to that which X should be in order to fulfil its purpose. (Thus, the nature of the clock includes what a clock should be to fulfil its function of telling the time.) Let us call 'nature' used in this sense 'nature$_1$'. Descartes points out that 'nature$_1$' is different from the 'nature' that is the totality of things endowed by God upon the human being. In respect of the latter, he writes, 'a sick [human] is no less one of God's creatures than a healthy one' (AT 7: 84, CSM 2: 58). God has equally made and ordained into existence the sick or dropsical human (with her natural dispositions) and the healthy human (with hers) – so both have 'natures' received from God. I shall denominate this sense of 'nature', *qua* whatever God endows on humans, as 'nature$_2$'.

Significantly, Descartes writes that 'nature$_1$' is 'simply a label which depends on my thought' (AT 7: 85, CSM 2: 59). What Descartes means is that when we conceive of (the body of) a sick human as 'departing from its nature', we are looking at matters *from our finite human point of view*. As embodied thinkers, we are concerned about our survival and well-being. From this point of view, a sick person whose third-grade 'sensations' do not serve the purpose of promoting such survival would be seen as suffering a privation of the perfection that a healthy person possesses. Similarly, a clock that does not fulfil the purpose of telling us the time would be seen as suffering the privation of a perfection that a well-constructed clock possesses. However, 'nature' used thus is simply a 'label' or classification which the finite thinker would use.

As opposed to that, Descartes claims that nature$_2$ is 'something which is really to be found in the things themselves' – nature$_2$ is that which God has endowed upon His creatures. Thus, Descartes writes:

> With respect to ['nature$_2$' as applied to the sick human], what is involved is not a mere label, but a *true error of nature*, namely, that it is thirsty at a time when drink is going to cause it harm.
>
> (AT 7: 85, CSM 2: 59)

Descartes points out that, from the perspective of what God has endowed upon His creatures, the sick person's affirmation that she ought to drink is a genuine 'error of nature' – that is, this error is due to the lack of perfection that God had ordained with respect to the faculties of the sick person. Descartes concludes:

> It thus remains to inquire how it is that the goodness of God does not prevent [nature$_2$ – that is, what God has ordained] from deceiving us.
>
> (ibid.)

The question here is a reprise, in slightly altered form, of the question in the Fourth Meditation: why did God create the (sick) human with imperfect faculties?

Descartes's subsequent 'answer' is odd, and at first sight, uncompelling. He first points out that the mind is indivisible, whereas the body is divisible. He then delineates mind–body relations via the example of the human who is misled into thinking that her foot is hurt when some other part of her body is hurt. This misleading perception comes about because the person's mind is related to her body in a specific way:

> My . . . observation is that the mind is not immediately affected by all parts of the body, but only by the brain, or perhaps just by one small part of the brain [via, as Descartes erroneously believed, the pineal gland].
>
> (AT 7: 86, CSM 2: 59)

Again, the body itself, as a part of the physical world, is 'a kind of machine . . . made up of bones, nerves, muscles, veins, blood and skin' (AT 7: 84, CSM 2: 58) and thus subject to the laws governing the physical world. This can be seen in the fact that the nerves that lead from the foot to the brain would (as Descartes erroneously believed) exhibit the same behaviour as a cord of string. One end of a cord of string will move, not just when the other end is tugged but also when the intermediate parts of the string are tugged. Similarly, Descartes imagines, the same motion will occur in the pineal gland, not just when the foot is hurt and pulls the nerve, but also when some intermediate part (say, in the lumbar region) exerts a pull.

Given the way in which Descartes imagines the mind to be related to the body, and given the structure of the body itself, he claims that it is best for the embodied thinker if a given 'movement of the brain' should produce the sensory response 'most especially conducive . . . to the preservation of the healthy [human]' (AT 7: 88, CSM 2: 60). Thus, in the case where the pineal gland supposedly moves because of a 'tug' from the nerves that end in the foot, this should result in a third-grade 'sensation' (that is, an idea) of pain, as this most conduces to the preservation of the embodied thinker:

> It is true that God could have made the nature of [humans] such that this particular motion to the brain could have indicated something else to the mind: it might . . . have made the mind aware of the actual motion occurring in the brain, or in the foot, or in any of the intermediate regions. . . . But there is nothing else which would have been so conducive to the continued well-being of the body [as the third-grade sensation of pain in the foot].
>
> (ibid.)

Descartes then brings this back to the case of the sick man who forms the (third-grade) 'sensation' of thirst:

> In the same way, when we need drink, there arises a certain dryness in the throat; this sets in motion the nerves of the throat, which in turn move the inner parts of the brain [Descartes's understanding of the physiological process is of course wide of the mark]. This motion produces . . . the sensation of thirst,

> because the most useful thing for us to know about the whole business is that we need drink in order to stay healthy.
>
> (AT 7: 88, CSM 2: 61)

Descartes concludes:

> It is quite clear from all this that, notwithstanding the immense goodness of God, the nature of [humans] as a combination of mind and body is such that it is bound to mislead him from time to time . . . Yet it is much better that it should mislead on this occasion [that is, when the human is sick with dropsy] than that it should always mislead when the body is in good health.
>
> (ibid.)

At first sight, this answer to Descartes's theodical problem is lame, and indeed a non-sequitur. In answer to the question of how an all-good God could have allowed the misleading idea of thirst in the dropsical human, he states that it is better that the human be misled on this occasion than that she is always misled in good health. But as Tierno points out:

> If [the consequences of having the person make mistakes when she is sick] do follow inevitably from mechanism, and the result is that we are disposed to act in ways directly harmful to us, then we can legitimately ask why God has chosen to make our bodies like machines.
>
> (Tierno 1997: 110)

We can easily counter Descartes's 'solution' by pointing out that an omnipotent God who 'wills what is best' should surely have created us such that our bodies were not like machines and thus did not mislead in this way (or alternatively, create us such that we are not embodied and so do not make these mistakes, and so on).

However, this counter to Descartes's 'solution' assumes that his account of how our bodies relate to the various (third-grade) sensations in us is a direct attempt to reconcile our imperfect faculties with the non-deception of God. But such an attempt would be quite pointless, given that the issue was already raised and dealt with in the Fourth Meditation. There, Descartes had pointed out that we are part of a wider order, and that lacking the divine point of view, we can never adequately comprehend that order. Thus, the question of why God ordained us with natural dispositions to form ideas of, say, thirst that may lead us astray admits of no answer beyond the fact (available to us *qua* finite thinkers) that we are part of a wider order, and these imperfections contribute to the overall perfection of that order.

Descartes's 'solution' – that it is better that we are misled occasionally by our natural dispositions than if we always are – is thus not a direct answer to why God 'who wills what is best' created us with occasionally misleading natural dispositions (there being no such answer available to the finite human thinker who accepts the existence of such a God). I suggest that it is, rather, a retreat back to the finite point of view. From this point of view, it is certainly better *for us* that we should sometimes

make mistakes through our natural dispositions than that we should always do so. What the discussion of the relation between the human mind and body makes clear is that we can be reasonably confident, given the structure of the human body and its relation to the mind (as Descartes understood them), that most of the time our natural dispositions will not lead us astray. Our 'natural' sensory responses are reliable most of the time, and this knowledge is what matters to us from a practical point of view.

The concern with things as they relate to the finite thinker continues into Descartes's next paragraph – the final one in the *Meditations*:

> [The previous discussion] is of the greatest help to me, not only for noticing all the errors to which my nature is liable, but also for enabling me to correct or avoid them without difficulty. For I know that in matters regarding the well-being of the body, all my senses report the truth much more frequently than not. Also, I can almost always make use of more than one sense to investigate the same thing; and in addition, I can use both my memory, which connects present experiences with preceding ones, and my intellect, which has by now examined all the causes of error.
>
> (AT 7: 89, CSM 2: 61)

Descartes in his final paragraph is clearly looking at things from the finite point of view, for he is now concerned with how he, as a finite embodied thinker, can best survive in, and learn about, the universe of which he is a part. Eschewing questions and puzzles about the wider order and the inscrutable purposes of God, Descartes is back to figuring out the means by which he may survive, thrive, and live the good life in his corner of the universe.

Theodicy and ethics

Descartes ends the *Meditations* with the recognition that he can never inhabit the divine point of view, and that his concern is to figure out, from his own finite perspective, how to survive and live well in the God-given universe of which he is a part. Such a concern clearly motivates the ethics that Descartes subsequently develops in the *Passions of the Soul*, and in exchanges with correspondents such as Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia (1618–1680) and Pierre-Hector Chanut (1604–1677). In this final section, I explore how Descartes's conclusions about theodicy in the *Meditations* influence the ethics that he develops in later life.

Descartes and egoism

Commentators on Cartesian ethics generally accept that Descartes's metaphysics crucially underpins his ethics. But how does it do so? What kind of ethics does Descartes's metaphysics give rise to? On one fairly standard account, Descartes's metaphysics is seen as giving rise to an ethics that is essentially individualist and egoistic. I will argue that this view of Cartesian ethics is mistaken.

We may begin by distinguishing two kinds of egoism, both of which have been attributed to Descartes. The first kind (hereafter E_1) maintains that:

> the ultimate goal that any agent aims for is her own pleasure or happiness.

That Descartes held this view has been ably argued by Guéroult, who sees Descartes as a psychological hedonist who maintains that an agent's actions are aimed at the final good of gaining happiness – in the form of satisfaction of mind – for herself (Guéroult 1984). Note that E_1 is a claim of *psychological* egoism. Insofar as he accepts E_1, Descartes is not claiming that an agent *should* act ultimately for her own pleasure or happiness: it is rather that the human being has been so constituted that she always does what (she thinks) will give her happiness or pleasure.

E_1 allows that the *proximate* goods an agent strives for in her pursuit of happiness could include both goods that accrue to her own benefit or those that accrue to other persons or society as whole. A second version of egoism attributed to Descartes (hereafter E_2) is concerned with the proximate goods that an agent should pursue. E_2 is the position that:

The proximate goods that an agent should strive for are those goods that accrue directly to her own individual benefit.

E_2, unlike E_1, makes a *normative* claim. Insofar as he accepts E_2, Descartes is seen as claiming that an agent *ought* to strive only for proximate goods that accrue to her own benefit. Accepting E_2 thus would make Descartes a supporter of *ethical* egoism.

E_1 does not entail E_2, and vice versa. As mentioned, E_1 maintains that the final good aimed at by an agent is her own individual happiness. This claim allows that the proximate goods the agent should pursue to achieve this final good be confined to those that directly accrue to her own benefit, or that they include goods that benefit others. E_2 holds that the proximate goods the ethical agent should pursue are those that directly accrue to her own benefit. This claim allows that these proximate goods are pursued for the sake of a further, final good (such as happiness), or that these proximate goods are pursued for their own sake (that is, they are also final goods). E_1 and E_2 are thus logically independent of each other. One can therefore hold both E_1 and E_2, neither of them, or one without the other.

Descartes has often been ascribed both E_1 and E_2. In what follows, I will simply accept that Descartes held E_1.[13] However, I will argue that Descartes manifestly did not hold to E_2. In this section, I begin with a fairly standard account of Descartes's ethics, and of how it supposedly derives from his metaphysics. While this account is found in a number of writers, I base my outline here primarily on Charles Taylor's well-known reading (Taylor 1989: 143–58). Textual evidence is then highlighted that militates against this reading, and an alternative account is offered of Descartes's ethics, in which this ethics is underpinned by the theodicy established in the *Meditations*.

A standard portrayal of Cartesian ethics

Descartes famously likened the whole of knowledge to a tree – the roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the three principal branches are medicine,

mechanics and morals (AT 9B: 14, CSM 1: 186). In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes had argued for a dualist ontology, positing that finite reality is comprised by (only) two kinds of substances – extended non-thinking matter and thinking non-extended minds. Cartesian dualism is often portrayed as the metaphysical 'root' or basis for much of Cartesian ethics.

Given this dualism, and accepting for the sake of the argument its premise that the material realm (including animals and plants) is a vast 'machine' subject to mechanical laws, it has been argued that Descartes sees the human thinker as 'utterly separated' from the material realm. Earlier thinkers such as Plato and Augustine had seen the cosmos as 'the embodiment of meaningful order which can define the good for us' (Taylor 1989: 149). In contrast, it is argued, the Cartesian human thinker is disengaged from the 'dead' material universe and hence does not see herself as a part of any wider, meaningful order. This results in an 'internalization' of moral sources. For the Cartesian agent, the good is no longer determined by a *found* external order, but is *constructed* by internal reason in accord with a set of canons. In the *Discourse on Method* Descartes asserts that *bon sens* or reason is 'naturally equal in all men' (AT 6: 2, CSM 1: 111). Again, as the Fourth Meditation had made clear, all humans are equally possessed of free will. For Descartes, the ethical or virtuous life is thus one in which we exert our free will in order to live as reason recommends.

But what is it like to live as reason recommends? Here, too, Descartes's determination of the means and ends of the good life is apparently shaped by his dualism of mind and matter. The thinker who recognizes herself as alienated from the mechanistic material world comes to *objectify* this material world and through such objectification, to see it as an instrument that she should effectively control to achieve her own rational goals. Descartes writes in a well-known passage from the *Discourse*:

> [The principles of my new physics] opened my eyes to the possibility of gaining new knowledge which would be very useful in life . . . Through [my new physics] we could know the power and action of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens and all the other bodies in our environment . . . and we could use this knowledge . . . [to] make ourselves . . . *the lords and masters of nature.*
>
> (AT 6: 61–2, CSM 1: 142, emphasis mine)

This passage seems to portray the material world as a mere means for achieving our own selfish human ends and goods. In it, Descartes exhorts us to use his new physics to discover the power of fire, water and so on, and use them to make ourselves 'lords and masters of nature'. Such mastery will yield us the benefits of the 'fruits of the earth', and of health (when we are able to obtain the cures of diseases from nature) (ibid.).

Apart from seeing nature as an instrument, Descartes also emphasizes the instrumentality of our own passions. These passions, like the third-grade 'sensations' of the Sixth Meditation, are brought about in the embodied thinker by various bodily occurrences, and they can, and should, be used to further her survival and well-being. According to Descartes, one acts appropriately when one follows what one's

reason tells one to do. But one's passions can be employed to further these rational (and selfish) goals. For instance, upon being confronted with a dangerous animal, the human is usually rationally motivated to flee (since staying puts oneself at great risk). The passion of fear would then strengthen this flight response, thus enabling the survival of the human *qua* substantial mind–body union. Thus, the passions for Descartes are essentially 'functional devices that . . . help preserve the body–soul substantial union' (Taylor 1989: 150).

For the passions to serve as an instrument to further the well-being of this substantial union, however, they must be harnessed so that they promote the rational goals of the agent. In acting blindly out of a passion like excessive anger, one may act against reason to the detriment of one's well-being. The challenge for the agent is to manipulate her passions to support the goals of reason. One cannot of course easily will away a strong passion that might lead one to act against one's reason, nor will into being a passion to support the goals of reason. Descartes's *Passions of the Soul* discusses *indirect* techniques for bringing our passions in line with the goals of reason. Such techniques are in effect techniques for the control of *one's own body* by the mind, since one induces the appropriate passion in a given situation by learning how to induce the *bodily* response in such a situation that will give rise to this passion.

The account of Cartesian ethics thus far supports the view that Descartes held on to E_2 – that is, he prescribes that an agent should strive for goods that accrue directly to her own benefit. Descartes's prescribed ends of personal survival, well-being and gain, no less than his prescription that one should manipulate both nature and one's body/passions for such gain, suggest that his ethics enjoins the agent to pursue her purely self-directed goals. The Cartesian ethical agent thus comes across as someone who acts to attain her *own* goods, with no discernible concern for the needs and interests of others.

That the Cartesian ethical agent is such an egoist is enhanced, not diminished, by Descartes's account of the virtues such an agent should display. As mentioned, the ethical life for Descartes is a life spent exerting our free will to follow what reason recommends. Taylor argues that this 'internalization' of morality results in the inward transposition of an earlier warrior-aristocratic ethic from public to personal space. The Cartesian ethical agent resembles the noble warrior in exhibiting the virtues of 'strength, firmness, resolution, control' in her willingness to follow the recommendations of reason (Taylor 1989: 153). The difference is that these virtues are manifested now not in public deeds of valour, but in *inner* adherence to rational goals.[14]

Descartes's celebration of attributes such as strength and resolution reinforces the view that Cartesian ethics is not primarily other-regarding in perspective. The goods of character to be striven for in the ethical life are self-centred, insofar as they are all concerned with the *personal* flourishing of the individual herself. Here too, Descartes's ethics seems to require that the agent strive for (proximate) goods that directly benefit herself. Thus, there are very strong grounds for ascribing E_2 to Descartes.

John Cottingham notes that this account of the Cartesian ethical agent as constantly striving to gain proximate goods that benefit herself is in tension with

Descartes's other ethical views. As mentioned, we find in Descartes an inward transposition of the warrior ethic from public to private space. But what is the basis for Descartes's injunction that strength and resolution be exerted inwards, rather than on the outer world? Descartes's 'inward turn' here is thought to derive from another earlier ethic – Stoicism. Earlier classical accounts, such as Aristotle's, had included outward flourishing (in the form of social status, honour, and riches) as an ineliminable part of the good life for the agent.[15] Stoicism, on the other hand, held that the good life may be achieved independently of one's external situation. Descartes follows the Stoic line in his letters to Elizabeth of Bohemia of August 1645, in which he discusses how one might attain the *vita beata* or happy life. He points out that the goods that bring happiness (by which he meant satisfaction of mind and contentment) fall into two classes – external goods such as honour, riches and health that are subject to vagaries of fortune, and inner goods such as virtue and wisdom that are entirely within our control. Descartes recommends that we seek our happiness from the inner goods wholly within our control, and that we focus in particular on virtue, which he considers the 'supreme good' (AT 4: 305; CSMK: 268) that is 'sufficient to make us content in this life' (AT 4: 267, CSMK: 258).

In short, Descartes follows the Stoics in recommending that we concentrate on an inner life of virtue, and eschew the pursuit of external goods like riches, honour, and health because the latter are subject to the vagaries of fortune. But this apparently conflicts with his other injunction (discussed earlier) that we manipulate the material world and our body/passions for our own health, well-being, and gain through the 'fruits of the earth'. Here we are enjoined precisely to gain external goods, the pursuit of which may not always be successful. Cottingham thus argues that Descartes's account of the good life involves a 'sometimes uneasy amalgam of disparate elements' (1998: 102).

In what follows, it will be argued that the view that Descartes held E_2 and enjoined the agent to pursue selfish (or self-directed) goals is a mistaken one. It will also be maintained that there is no internal tension between the different portions of Descartes's ethics.

Theodicy and the goals of the Cartesian agent

Descartes did not in fact accept E_2. To see this, we may begin with the supposed role of the passions in the ethical life. Descartes is often seen as enjoining that the passions be manipulated to promote the survival and well-being of the *individual herself*, *qua* mind–body composite. But in fact he also thinks that the passions may be used to promote the good of other persons, or one's country, or God.

Descartes's account of love in *The Passions of the Soul* shows that he thinks this. The passion of love involves that one 'joins [oneself] willingly' to the loved object (AT 11: 387, CSM 1: 356). Moreover, in thus joining herself to the loved object, the lover is always ready to 'abandon the lesser part of the whole [she composes] with it, so as to preserve the other part' (AT 11: 390, CSM 1: 357). But how does one determine which is the greater part of the whole formed by the lover and her loved object? According to Descartes, this is determined by the form of love we feel for the

object. The latter in turn is determined by the level of esteem we have for the object:

> [W]hen we have less esteem for it than ourselves, we have only a simple affection for it; when we esteem it equally with ourselves, that is called 'friendship'; and when we have more esteem for it, our passion may be called 'devotion'.
>
> (ibid.)

In the case of affection, the agent feels less esteem for the loved object than herself, and so she is the greater part of the whole, and would put her interests above those of the loved object. In the case of devotion, the agent feels greater esteem for the loved object than herself, and so the loved object is considered the greater part of the whole. The agent would then, if necessary, abandon her interests for the preservation of the loved object.

Descartes maintains that, for a rational and well-judging agent, the principal object of devotion is 'undoubtedly the supreme Deity, for whom we cannot fail to have devotion when we know him as we ought' (ibid.). In addition, one can also have devotion for one's sovereign, country, town or even persons whom one esteems highly. In these cases of devotion, 'we prefer the thing loved so strongly that we are not afraid to die in order to preserve it' (AT 11: 390–1, CSMK: 358).

Clearly, then, Descartes does not think that the role of the passions is confined to promoting the survival and well-being of the individual. A rational agent can appropriately place the interests of her loved objects (God, sovereign and so on) above her own, to the extent of even forfeiting her life for these interests. Indeed, even in the case of friendship, where the lover feels equal esteem for herself and the loved person (and both presumably form equal parts of the whole), Descartes indicates that one should place the interests of one's friend above one's own. He tells Chanut that friendship between two humans is not perfect 'unless each is ready to say in favour of the other: "It is I who did the deed, I am here, turn your swords against me"'[16](AT 4: 612, CSMK: 311). Descartes's account of love suggests that the standard image of the Cartesian agent (as an ethical egoist who pursues proximate goods that only contribute to her own well-being) is quite misleading.

Descartes's position that devotion is appropriate for God, one's sovereign and so on, and that friendship is appropriate for one's equals, is underpinned by a different aspect of his metaphysic than that usually discussed in standard accounts of Cartesian ethics. On the standard accounts, the metaphysical 'root' of Cartesian ethics is Cartesian dualism. Such dualism leads the thinker to see herself as 'utterly separated' from an alien universe. As a result, the cosmos no longer represents a meaningful (external) order to her, and the source of morality is internalized to her own reason. The good is now defined by (internal) reason-constructed orders, where the emphasis is on the instrumental control of the universe (including one's own body) for the achievement of the agent's own goods and gains.

But there is another aspect of Cartesian metaphysics that underpins an almost wholly opposing ethics. By the end of the *Meditations*, Descartes not only recognizes the dualism of mind and body, but also that these minds and body are (as the

Metaphysical Argument in the Fourth Meditation makes clear) part of a wider God-ordained and God-enacted universe. While the finite thinker cannot, from her finite point of view, comprehend this wider order or the role she plays in it, she does recognize that she has a 'function' in the wider universe. Thus, far from being alienated from the universe, she recognizes herself to be a part of a wider order, fulfilling a specific function within the overall whole. In recognizing herself to be part of this wider order ordained and enacted by God, one might expect that she would not relentlessly pursue her own goods and gains, but would have some consideration for the interests of these orders (and those who inhabit them).

Evidence that the Cartesian ethical agent does have consideration for the latter can be found in Descartes's letter to Elizabeth of Bohemia of 15 September 1645:

> After acknowledging the goodness of God, the immortality of our souls and the immensity of the universe, there is yet another truth that is, in my opinion, most useful to know. That is, that though each of us is a person distinct from others, whose interests are accordingly in some way different from those of the rest of the world, *we ought still to think that none of us could subsist alone and that each one of us is really one of the many parts of the universe, and more particularly a part of the earth, the state, the society and the family to which we belong by our domicile, our oath of allegiance and our birth. And the interests of the whole, of which each of us is a part, must always be preferred to those of our own particular person . . .*
>
> (AT 4: 293, CSMK: 266, emphasis mine)[17]

In the passage above, Descartes maintains that the interests of the (God-ordained) wholes of universe, state, and family must be taken into consideration – indeed must take precedence[18] – when the agent is deciding how to act. Clearly, then, the good that the ethical agent strives for is thus (at least partially) defined in terms of these wider orders.

That the agent should have cognizance of the good of the wider wholes of which he is a part is reinforced by Descartes's subsequent elaboration of the above passage. Focusing on how the individual is to relate to the community of which she is a part, Descartes first points out that

> if someone saw everything in relation to himself, he would not hesitate to injure others greatly when he thought he could draw some slight advantage; and he would have no true friendship, no fidelity, *no virtue at all*.
>
> (ibid., emphasis mine)

For Descartes, a person who sees everything solely in relation to herself is a person of 'no virtue at all'. A necessary condition of being a virtuous agent is thus that one should 'see things' in relation to others as well. He goes on to draw the following picture of the virtuous agent who sees things in relation to the wider community:

> [I]f someone considers himself a part of the community, he delights in doing good to everyone, and does not hesitate even to risk his life in the service of

> others when the occasion demands. If he could, he would even be willing to lose his soul to save others.
>
> (ibid.)

For Descartes, someone who sees herself as part of a wider communal whole will act for the good of others in that community. (Indeed, she is willing to lose even her own immortal soul for their sake.) In a subsequent letter to Elizabeth in October 1645, Descartes adds that great inner satisfaction or pleasure *especially* accompanies 'actions which proceed from a pure affection for others which has no reference to oneself, that is, from the Christian virtue called charity' (AT 4: 309, CSMK: 269–70).

Thus, while the influences of the warrior ethic and Stoicism on Cartesian ethics have been well noted, what has received less attention is the presence of a Christian influence that enjoins an attitude of love, duty, and charity towards others, where this attitude is underpinned by the recognition that the agent is created by God and has her part to play within the wider God-enacted order. Given the latter, one can better understand Descartes's claims in the *Passions of the Soul* concerning the loves of a well-judging agent, and her attitude towards them.

Descartes maintains that a well-judging agent should feel devotion for God, such that she is not afraid to die in following God's will. In the Fourth Meditation, Descartes had argued that all evil and defect are absences of perfection, and that his own creation is a perfection, as are the attributes that God had endowed him with. This engenders in him an attitude of gratitude: 'I have reason to give thanks to him who has never owed me anything for the great bounty that he has shown me, rather than thinking myself . . . robbed of any gifts that he did not bestow' (AT 7: 60, CSM 2: 42).

Given that this is Descartes's attitude, it is understandable that he should maintain that the rational and well-judging agent should accord God devotion – such devotion being the outcome of gratitude for the 'great bounty' of perfections endowed upon her. Again, this agent would have devotion for her community, family and so on because she recognizes that they are part of the wider order enacted by God. Insofar as order is a good, these smaller orders are perfections or goods that God bestowed upon the universe. And as these smaller orders are perfections bestowed by God, and are creations of God, they ought to be preserved and enhanced. Thus, the individual should have as one of her goals the continuance and well-being of these wholes. Finally, friendship is also a good or perfection bestowed by God, so the individual may also legitimately act towards the preservation of one's friends.

In short, the Cartesian agent is one who can feel love in the form of friendship, and religious and community-directed devotion, and in doing so, rationally and appropriately put the interests of others above her own. This is underpinned by a metaphysics in which she has her place in the wider (God-created) universe, as well as in the smaller wholes such as state, society and family. In seeing herself as belonging to these wholes, she has concern for the interests of others in these wholes.

What I've outlined above is an important but neglected dimension of Cartesian ethics. While commentators may not explicitly *deny* some of the claims in this section (for instance, that the Cartesian agent does act for the good of others), they usually omit any consideration of them. This omission, combined with their regular emphasis on the Cartesian injunctions to manipulate nature and one's body/passions for the good of the individual human, results in a misleading representation of Descartes's ethical views.

Self and others in Cartesian ethics

I have just argued that the picture of the Cartesian ethical agent as someone who seeks only proximate goods that accrue to her personal benefit is misleading. But there is compelling evidence (for instance in the Sixth Meditation and the *Passions*) that Descartes does think that the human agent should act for her *own* survival and well-being. How is this to be reconciled with the picture, sketched above, of the Cartesian ethical agent as one who is willing to sacrifice all for country, community and friends?

As portrayed above, the life of the Cartesian virtuous agent is indeed selfless to the point of extreme bleakness. This agent is portrayed as a paragon who always puts the interests of the larger whole before her own, 'delights in doing good to everyone', and is prepared to risk losing her soul for others. But I will argue that this picture, when taken alone, is as misleading as the one that suggests that the goods pursued by such an agent are wholly confined to those that directly benefit her.

Note first that, in the passage where Descartes tells Elizabeth that the interests of the various wholes 'must be preferred to those of our own', he in fact qualifies this by saying that this is to be done 'with measure, of course, and discretion' (AT 4: 293, CSMK: 266). When Elizabeth subsequently asks him how far she should go in her devotion to the community, he writes back that 'it is not a matter on which it is necessary to be very precise' and that she should do enough to satisfy her conscience (AT 4: 316, CSMK: 273). At first sight, this answer does not seem helpful, but it is consonant with the chief tenets of Cartesian ethics.

For Descartes, virtue is sticking firmly to doing 'whatever reason recommends'. While devotion to God and country, and concern for community and friends are included in what reason recommends to the well-judging agent, they are not the *only* things recommended by reason. Descartes describes health as a 'chief good' (AT 6: 62, CSM 1: 143), and as mentioned, he enjoins one to harness nature[19] and one's body/passions to further personal survival and well-being. So Cartesian ethics may enjoin the pursuit of various types of goods – some that benefit others and some that benefit the self. The Cartesian rational agent is neither a selfish ethical egoist, nor a selfless drudge.

But, one might then ask, given the limited resources of the finite human agent, how is one to determine whether one's own goods or the goods of others are to take precedence? For Descartes, this is also a matter for rational casuistry. The first rule of the *morale par provision* mentioned in the *Discourse*, and repeated in a letter to Elizabeth, is 'that [the agent] should always try to employ his mind as well as he can

to discover what he should or should not do in all the circumstances of life' (AT 4: 265, CSMK: 257). As mentioned, virtue is simply sticking to what reason recommends, and this presumably includes what reason recommends with respect to which goods are to be pursued first, given an individual's particular circumstances.

If this is right, then the apparent tension (mentioned earlier) between the Cartesian injunctions to try to master nature and one's body/passions for one's external gain, and to concentrate on a life of inner virtue can also be resolved. The life of virtue can (partially) include that one pursues personal goods such as health and well-being, and that one masters nature and one's body/passions in order to achieve these goods. However, the virtuous agent pursues such goods *within the context of the recommendations of reason*. Such an agent would differ from the agent who pursues such goods regardless of rational requirements. The agent who pursues such goods regardless of the recommendations of reason might, for example, be someone who pursues health out of a passional fear of being sick, or pursues wealth out of greed. Such an agent is likely to feel disappointment and despair when denied these goods by external fortune. In contrast, the former would still feel an inner satisfaction or pleasure even when she is unable to achieve these goods, since she would know that she has pursued them in accord with the requirements of virtue (that is, in accord with the recommendations of reason). Commentators note that Cartesian ethics locates virtue in the *resolute attempt* to achieve the various reason-recommended goods, rather than the *achievement* of the goods themselves, and that one's inner satisfaction derives from the former. So the injunction to (partially) pursue external goods like health is quite consonant with the injunction to pursue an inner life of virtue. Provided one sticks resolutely to pursuing this (and other) reason-recommended aims, one would have achieved this inner life of virtue.[20]

Seen in this light, the concerns of the Cartesian ethical agent may not seem very different from the concerns of a contemporary ethical agent. Like the contemporary agent, she is faced with various goods that might be pursued – both those that accrue to others and to herself. Insofar as she tries her rational best to take into account both her own and others' goods in her pursuit of the good life, and insofar as she pursues these goods with firmness and resolution, she arguably resembles the ethical agent of today.

However, there is one crucial difference between the Cartesian ethical agent, and her contemporary counterpart. Given the secular tenor of this age, if one accepts that it is reason that recommends to us the goods we should pursue,[21] this is tantamount to accepting that reason *defines* the goods to be pursued. Lacking an external and reason-independent moral authority such as God, we are inclined to accept that it is reason that *makes* or, in Taylor's terms, *constructs* the good for us. This, however, is not how Descartes views the role that reason plays with respect to the good life.

As mentioned earlier, the Cartesian ethical and well-judging agent is to be understood in the context of a larger found order established by God. But this well-judging agent can never access the divine point of view on such an order. She is thus bound to think of and comprehend the universe from her finite point of view – that is, within the limits of the finite reason that God has bestowed upon her. Within this finite perspective, reason presents to the human agent certain things as perfections or

goods (for instance, health, community, being born to a noble estate) and others as privations or evils (such as ill-health, poverty, and social chaos). As mentioned, some of these perfections and privations are not within the control of the human agent (for example, being born to a noble estate is not a perfection within her control), while others are (for instance, freedom from epistemic error is a perfection attainable by all who exercise their will with care).

The Cartesian agent then uses reason to identify which goods and privations are within her control and which are not, and to accept those (particularly the privations) that are beyond her control. As for the perfections that *are* within our control, Descartes tells Elizabeth that 'the true function of reason in the conduct of life is to examine and consider the value of all the perfections . . . which can be acquired by our conduct' (AT 4: 286–7, CSMK: 265). In exerting her will to follow reason's recommendations as to which of these perfections are more valuable and should be pursued, the human agent lives the virtuous and good life.

But it is evident that, while reason points out to us what goods and perfections are, and which are to be pursued given our limited resources, reason cannot, *pace* Taylor, *make* or *construct* these goods for us. As mentioned earlier, Descartes holds that our finite reason is endowed upon us by God, and that the rules of reason are God-willed and 'inborn in our minds'. Again, as mentioned earlier, he also emphasizes that it is God who defines the perfections and goods of this life.[22] Thus, unlike her contemporary counterpart, it is God who determines the goods that the Cartesian ethical agent ought to pursue in this life. Reason then is the *medium* through which God conveys to her what these goods are, and the order in which she should attain them.

A final overview of the Cartesian ethical agent

Like the egoistical agent of common portrayal, Descartes's ethical agent is driven by reason and seeks to follow the recommendations of reason. However, the use of reason leads her to a very different set of conclusions than those commonly portrayed: to the recognition that she is part of a larger God-ordained universe with a role in that universe (and other smaller God-ordained wholes). While God's wider order(s) and willings for that order remain wholly beyond her finite comprehension, she is nevertheless able to carve out a purposeful existence for herself. This is because her God-endowed reason points out to her the goods that she ought to pursue in this life (where these include not just goods to herself, but goods to her loved objects, the wider wholes of which she is part, and to other persons in these wholes). Again, reason points out which goods should be pursued first, given her limited resources. In resolutely exerting her will to follow the recommendations of reason, she lives the virtuous life and finds contentment and satisfaction of mind. Despite the mystery of the God-enacted wider order, Descartes clearly holds that there is room for human purpose and fulfilment.

6 Conclusion

Descartes's views on material falsity continue to tantalize, and to draw scholars.[1] In this book, I have offered a close reading of the Cartesian notion of material falsity, as well as the role that it plays in developing the argument in the *Meditations*. This reading has been structured around two key desiderata:

1 Descartes's *Meditations* is exactly that – a meditation, through which Descartes (or if one prefers, the meditator) destroys preconceived opinion and builds, step by careful step, a new account of the self, the Creator and the created universe.
2 Descartes's thought is a 'tapestry woven upon a weft' (Carraud 1987: 74).[2] Thus, there must be cognizance of the (medieval and late-Scholastic) background upon which the *Meditations* and its arguments are woven.

I now end with a brief summary of how these two desiderata have helped shaped the account given in this book.

I begin with (1). Wilson writes that she 'suspects that the causal account [of representation] was influential in Descartes's thought' (Wilson 1990: 11). The reading offered here is that Descartes really did hold on to a qualified version of the causal account of representation. Attention to the structure and progression of the *Meditations* reveals that Descartes's two key accounts of material falsity take place in different epistemic conditions. Thus, the account of material falsity in the Third Meditation, constrained by its epistemic context, sees an idea as representing the thing with objective being in the thinker's intellect. In contrast, the account of material falsity in the Fourth Set of Replies, freed of the epistemic constraints of the earlier account, sees the idea as primarily representing its cause (though allowing room that some ideas may also represent what is beneficial/harmful to the mind–body composite).

Attention to the detailed progression of arguments in the *Meditations* also reveals that Descartes's account there of material falsity contributes importantly to the subsequent argument in that work. False ideas, it turns out, literally 'proceed from nothing', insofar as they are due to an *absence* of perfection in the thinker. This initial recognition that the thinker can suffer such absences of perfection is crucial to the Third Meditation proofs of God's existence, which proceed by way of contrasting the finite thinker's absences of perfections with God's absolute perfection. They are

also an important component of Descartes's defence of his theodicy in the Fourth and Sixth Meditations – absences of perfections, it turns out, can be seen either as negations or privations, and the same absence can be seen as both negation (with respect to God) and privation (with respect to the finite thinker). This dual perspective on absences of perfection is crucial to Descartes's attempt to reconcile his own epistemic errors, as well as 'errors of nature', with a perfect God 'who wills what is best'. Finally, cognizance that there is a divine order, wherein each absence of perfection contributes to the overall perfection of the order, enables the human agent to recognize that she is a part of a larger God-given whole. This recognition forms a crucial part of Descartes's ethics, for it requires of the agent that she acts at least partially for the good of her wider community.

We now come to (2). The *Meditations* may be seen as an intricate tapestry woven upon a medieval and late-Scholastic background. To fully understand its arguments, therefore, we need to understand that background. In this respect, the book takes cognizance of how Descartes's views derive from, and may be understood in the light of, the works of predecessors such as Suárez and Augustine. However, it also emphasizes how Descartes, while drawing freely from these predecessors, may also *depart* significantly from their positions. Descartes is well-known for putting 'new wine in old bottles' (and for failing to highlight that he has done so). Thus, Descartes's account of ideas$_m$ and their relationship to ideas$_o$ does not mirror exactly the Suárezian account of the formal concept and its relation to the objective concept. Again, Descartes's account of the relation between ideas, judgements, and the realm of existing things is not easily mapped on to the standard late-Scholastic account of the relation between concepts, judgements and the realm of existing things. Finally, Descartes's account of material falsity in ideas draws from, but is not wholly congruent with, the Suárezian account of material falsity, which applies specifically to apprehensions of conjunctions and disjunctions. Recognizing how Descartes both drew from, and departed from, his predecessors is a key to understanding his central concepts, and how these concepts relate to each other – and consequently to understanding Descartes's claims in the *Meditations*.

Given the obscurity of Descartes's pronouncements on material falsity, and the centrality of the notion to understanding the issues of Cartesian representation, truth and falsehood, the debate on what Descartes actually meant by 'material falsity' will go on well into the future. This book has offered one reading of material falsity (and of its importance to the argument of the *Meditations*), while paying attention to both the structure of the *Meditations* and the medieval and late-Scholastic background that informs its claims.

Notes

1 An Introduction to Descartes's Materially False Ideas

1 See, for instance, Kenny 1968, Menn 1998, and Williams 1978.
2 See, for instance, Dicker 1993, Gaukroger 1995, and Rodis-Lewis 1998.
3 An asterisk indicates that I have departed slightly from CSM's translation of the given passage.
4 The point is made in Ariew and Grene 1995: 4.
5 A recent exception is Vinci 1998.
6 See, for instance, Ariew 1999, Ariew and Grene 1995, Carriero 1990, Gaukroger 1995, Grene 1991, Marion 1975, 1981, and 1999b, Menn 1998, Secada 2000, Rodis-Lewis 1998, and Rozemond 1998.
7 Recent books that make this distinction include Broughton 2002, Hatfield 2003, and Wilson 2003.

2 'Static' Interpretations of Materially False Ideas – A Survey

1 Normore obviously means by 'false ideas' *materially* false ideas. TMD, on which Normore bases his interpretation of what a false idea is, is concerned with material falsity in an idea. Note also that Bolton also uses the term 'false ideas' to denominate materially false ideas specifically.
2 Bolton too accepts that there is a distinction between reality and existence for Descartes, and that ideas may represent potentially real (but actually non-existing) objects.

3 A 'Dynamic' Interpretation of Materially False Ideas

1 See, for instance, Cronin 1966, Marion 1996, Marion 1999b, Secada 2000, Wells 1984, and Wells 1990.
2 See, for instance, AT 8A: 17–19, CSM 1: 204–5; AT 7: 147–8, CSM 2: 105; and AT 7: 204, CSM 2: 270.
3 Descartes refers to material truth in AT 4: 685 and AT 7: 151, CSM 2: 107, although neither reference seems particularly helpful in understanding material truth with respect to ideas. I thank an anonymous reviewer for Routledge for pointing out the second reference.
4 I assume here that the conditions listed are necessary, but not sufficient (since one can plausibly maintain that other conditions might be necessary for true representation). It is possible, however, that Descartes took these conditions to be necessary *and* sufficient.
5 The one idea whose cause Descartes does know, and that ACP can get a grip on within Descartes's epistemic constraints at this stage in the *Meditations*, is the idea of himself *qua* thinker. (After all, Descartes knows that he exists, and presumably knows he is the cause

of his idea of himself.) Thus, whenever I discuss ACP as inapplicable to Descartes's ideas, I mean to exclude his idea of himself.

6 It is not claimed here that ACP would be applicable to all ideas, even if an external world exists. For instance, ACP would not apply to invented ideas. (For instance, the invented idea of a mermaid is caused by the thinker's inventive faculty, but one would not say the idea is false because it fails to represent its cause accurately). Thus, ACP would apply only to a certain class of ideas – those which *purport* to represent their causes.

The point being made here is simply this: given that Descartes does not know if there is an external world, ACP cannot even be applied to this class of ideas.

7 Descartes states in the Causal Principle that he is seeking for the *efficient* cause of his ideas. However, commentators have engaged in some debate as to whether Descartes accepted causal dualism, and in particular, the position that his 'sensory' ideas may be efficiently caused by corporeal matter. Some have argued that he is an 'occasionalist' with respect to the mind–body relationship (see Clatterbaugh 1999: 17–45 for an excellent discussion). If Descartes thinks that physical occurrences occasion, rather than produce, his 'sensory' ideas, then he may be somewhat imprecise when he claims in the Causal Principle to be seeking for the efficient cause of his ideas. Thus, although the Causal Principle is concerned with the 'efficient' causes of Cartesian ideas, I do not rule out that such 'efficient' causation might involve occasional 'causes' rather than efficient causes as we would usually construe them (that is, as causes that directly 'produce' a particular effect). In other words, my claims in this book are neutral between the causal dualist and occasionalist positions on Cartesian mind–body relations. Again, when it is claimed that Descartes accepts ACP (the Accurate Causal Portrayal account of representation) in certain epistemic contexts, this does not rule out that the 'efficient cause' of an idea here could be what occasions the idea in the thinker.

8 See also AT 7: 45, CSM 2: 31; AT 7: 102–3, CSM 2: 74–5; and AT 7: 161, CSM 2: 114.

9 Fairly detailed treatments are found in, for instance, Cronin 1966, Secada 2000, and Wells 1990.

10 There are differences in commentators' views about the *kind* of reality that the $idea_o$ has. For instance, Wells holds that the $idea_o$ is a true and immutable nature, whereas Kenny's discussion indicates that he thinks that the $idea_o$ can be an existing thing such as the sun. Kenny also suggests that there is an inconsistency in Descartes's treatment of $ideas_o$.

11 Commentators sometimes use the locution that $ideas_m$ 'have' objective reality. But the actual term that Descartes uses is that $ideas_m$ 'contain' objective reality (see Chappell 1986: 190).

12 See, for instance, Alanen 1994, Alanen 2003, Chappell 1986, and Guéroult 1984–5.

13 Descartes holds that an $idea_m$ may contain different levels or degrees of objective reality according to the thing represented in the idea. This suggests that the objective reality in an idea is not to be identified directly with the thing represented in the idea, since this would entail that these things have different degrees or levels. Rather, the $idea_m$ contains (a certain level of) objective reality *in virtue of* the thing represented.

14 One might, at this point, query the plausibility of Descartes's claim that ideas that represent no things have *no* existing cause at all. Surely, such ideas must have some sort of cause – that is, if Descartes has these ideas, they must have come about in him by some means or other. This issue is dealt with in the latter half of Chapter 4, where it is shown that there is an important sense in which Descartes thinks that the idea that represents no-thing genuinely has no existing cause.

15 Here, the term 'cause' pertains to the cause that gives rise to the *objective reality* contained in the idea. Descartes distinguishes between the formal and objective reality in an idea. For Descartes, all ideas possess formal reality insofar as they are modes of a thinker's mind. This formal reality must (according to the Causal Principle) have an existing cause, and Descartes maintains that the thinker himself is the cause of the formal reality of his ideas (AT 7: 40–1, CSM 2: 28)

16 Note that when I claim that Descartes is certain at the point of TMD that a particular idea has objective reality, I am not claiming that Descartes *knows* (has stable and lasting

knowledge) that the idea has objective reality. At that point in the Third Meditation, Descartes is only certain that an idea has objective reality while his attention is focused on the idea (see AT 7: 36, CSM 2: 25). In this book, I follow Williams in maintaining that Descartes holds that he only has stable and lasting knowledge after God has been established as a non-deceiver. (Williams 1978: 202)

17 At this point, it might be objected that, when Descartes describes ideas as as-if images of things (*tanquam rerum imagines*), he is not claiming that ideas are as-if of *things*, but may turn out not to be of things at all. Rather, he is claiming that ideas are as-if *images* (of things), but need not be actual images. As Kenny points out, the Cartesian $idea_m$ can represent immaterial things, and can do so without involving images of material things (Kenny 1968: 108). It could then be argued that, when Descartes states that ideas are as-if images, he is pointing out that ideas are like images insofar as they perform a representative function. However, representations in ideas need not involve images.

On this alternative reading, $ideas_m$ are always of things (that is, they always have objects). However, they are not, or not always, images of those things. Such a reading would be consonant with the position that all $ideas_m$ contain objective reality, since every $idea_m$ must be directed its own object.

However, this reading cannot be correct. First, while Descartes does sometimes specify ideas to be 'as-if *images* of things' (AT 7: 37, CSM 2: 25), he also states more briefly that ideas are 'as-if of things' (AT 7: 44, CSM 2: 30). This supports my reading that $ideas_m$ purport to be of things, but may not actually be of things. It would not support the alternative reading, on which $ideas_m$ must always be of things (in other words, have objects), and cannot merely be *as-if* of things. Second, to the extent that this alternative reading is tied to the claim that all $ideas_m$ contain objective reality, it would also be subject to the arguments against this latter claim which were put forward earlier in the chapter.

18 This applies in those contexts where AA, not ACP, obtains as an account of representation between an $idea_m$ and its object. In a context where ACP obtains, the $idea_m$ would represent its cause.

19 In contrast, Descartes never makes any explicit commitment as to the precise cause of his *intellectual/imaginative* ideas of extension mentioned in the Fifth Meditation. It has been suggested that the cause might be God, who eminently contains the immutable natures of the countless geometrical figures mentioned in the Fifth Meditation.

20 For instance, he writes in the Third Meditation: 'the chief and most common mistake which is to be found here consists in my judging that the ideas which are in me *resemble, or conform to*, things located outside me' (AT 7: 37, CSM 2: 26, emphasis mine).

21 Field too notes that some of the passages I have mentioned do not support Wells's reading that all confused and obscure ideas are false (Field 1993: 316n).

22 See note 16. Prior to the proof of God's deception, it is 'evident' to Descartes that a clear and distinct idea represents its object accurately, while the thinker is attending to the idea. Once God is established to be a non-deceiver, he has stable and lasting knowledge that a clear and distinct idea represents accurately its object.

23 Commentators who hold this view include Flage and Bonnen 1999, Kenny 1968, Menn 1998, and Secada 2000.

24 On this view, Descartes's main departure from his late-Scholastic predecessors was to claim this judgement as an act of will, while they had held it to be an act of the intellect.

25 One question that may arise is this: what about the (putatively) false idea of cold in TMD, which is characterized as one that 'represents no things as (real) things'? Where would such an idea be located? Such an idea of cold would also occur in the third grade of sensory response. That is, within the constrained epistemic context of the Third Meditation, the thinker would make the obscure judgement, based on the sensation of cold, that cold is a possible existent or real thing. In doing so, she would have an idea of cold that represents cold as a thing (when it might be no-thing).

26 Descartes of course differs from Suárez in holding that affirmation and denial is an act of will, rather than intellect.

27 See note 25 above. Some judgements in the third grade of sensory response need not pertain to existing objects.
28 Descartes holds that the (clear and distinct) idea of God is innate (see, for instance, AT 7: 68, CSM 2: 47). Nevertheless, this idea may be said to be 'immitted' into the thinker by God, insofar as the idea is 'put' into the thinker by God, as a stamp is put by the craftsman upon his work (AT 7: 51, CSM 2: 35).
29 I would like to thank Jonathan Dore and John Elliott for helpful discussions on this issue.

4 The Metaphysical Status of Material Falsity (and of Error)

1 Descartes's epistemic limitations at that point may enforce his acceptance of AA as an account of representation in TMD, but note that AA is applied in that discussion to ideas of corporeal things that are 'sensory'.
2 In a later paper, Wilson argues that the ideas of size and shape in TMD are not sensory, being the abstract or general ideas discussed in the Fifth Meditation (Wilson 1999a). The advantage of this view is that there is then no difficulty in claiming that such ideas as clear and distinct. However, as I have argued, there is textual evidence that the ideas of size and shape in TMD are sensory (or ostensibly sensory) ideas. I also argue that there are no major difficulties in maintaining that these sensory ideas are clear and distinct.
3 See, for instance, Kenny 1968, Sievert 1975, Markie 1986 and 1992, and Vinci 1998.
4 Other similar passages include AT 7: 161, CSM 2: 114 and AT 7: 175–6, CSM 2: 124.
5 See note 16 of Chapter 3. Given God's non-deception, we have stable and lasting knowledge that our idea of extended matter derives from extended matter itself.
6 There might be a worry, on such views as Gaukroger's, as to how *non-specific* size and shape could conform to geometrical laws, given that these views see geometry as expressing relations between *determinate* or *specific* sizes and shapes (See Gaukroger 1992). But it is possible to have sensory ideas of (non-specific) size and shape while recognizing that *if* they embodies a determinate size X, *then* X would have to obey geometrical laws when entering into relations with other sizes and shapes. Such sensory ideas of non-specific size and shape would qualify as clear and distinct.
7 On this view, Descartes would be committed to holding that modes of substance can possess other modes. There does not seem to me to be any difficulty with this position.
8 See, for example, AT 6: 130–4, CSM 1: 167–9; AT 8A: 35, CSM 1: 219.
9 CSM's translation is a bit less emphatic: 'Now there is in me a passive faculty of sensory perception . . . ' But the emphasis in the original Latin might help bring out that Passage A develops from Passage 1.
10 The argument of PEWM may militate against O'Neill's reading of eminent containment. Descartes states in PEWM that if God or a non-material substance causes our ideas of size and shape, the properties of size and shape would be eminently contained in them. On O'Neill's reading, these properties could then be *exemplified* in God or non-material substance. Now PEWM's key argument is that, given God's veracity, the distinct sensory ideas of size and shape license the inference that material substance exists with the properties of size and shape. If we accept O'Neill's account, this inference might be unacceptable. These sensory ideas of size and shape would arguably license that *some* substance exists with the properties of size and shape, but O'Neill's account *leaves open that this substance could be God/a non-material substance*. PEWM thus would not go through. Clatterbaugh's account, which sees eminent containment of sizes and shapes as the possession of *higher* properties than sizes and shapes, escapes this difficulty. Insofar as God's veracity guarantees that one's distinct sensory ideas of size and shape license the inference that a substance exists with those properties it licenses an inference that *matter* exists, as only matter would exemplify the properties of size and shape.
11 For some discussions of Augustine's influence on Descartes, see, for instance, Gilson 1951, Janowski 2000, Janowski 2004, Marion 1981 and 1999a, Matthews 1992, Menn 1998.

12 Note that such a thought cannot be included under ideas$_m$ strictly taken, which are always at least purportedly of things.
13 That is, the idea has no cause from which its objective being may derive.
14 This passage is also explored by Flage and Bonnen 1999: 85–91. The material here was developed independently of Flage and Bonnen's work, which came to my attention later.
15 I would like to thank Joseph Camp for the suggestion that a look at Aristotle's four causes might prove helpful for determining what sort of explanatory rubric a 'deficiency' explanation might fall under.
16 According to medieval philosophers such as Aquinas, a 'privation' is an absence of perfection that a substance ought to have given its nature, and a negation is merely an absence of perfection (without the additional connotation). The ideas of heat and cold and of, say, rest and movement are similar in that they are of opposing pairs, yet Descartes in the Third Meditation describes cold as the 'privation' of heat, but rest as the 'negation' of movement (AT 7: 44–6, CSM 2: 30–1). This suggests that Descartes does not yet make a clear distinction between negation and privation. (I will argue that he makes this distinction in the Fourth Meditation, though it is somewhat different from Aquinas's.)

Note also that, at that point, Descartes does not even know what substance heat and cold are features of (are they features of his embodied self or of the physical world external to him?). Thus, when he says that cold is a privation of heat, he could not mean that heat is a perfection that a substance *ought* to have, since he does not even know what substance it is that could have heat as its perfection. Insofar as he does not know what sort of substance has heat as its perfection, he has no clear idea of the nature of that substance. How then could he maintain that heat is a perfection that belongs to that substance by virtue of its nature?

Thus, when Descartes says that cold may be a privation of heat, he means merely that cold is an absence of the perfection or mode of heat – whatever substance the latter perfection may turn out to inhere in.
17 At this point, 'perception' and 'conception' would amount to the same thing for Descartes – namely, it is that which is presented before the mind (minus the additional forms of judgement or emotion).
18 Descartes does not really mean to claim here that rest is the absence of the perfection 'movement' or even that darkness is the absence of the perfection 'light'. He could not do this, given what he holds in his physics. As he clearly states in his physics, both rest and movement are modes (perfections) of the physical world. (Indeed, one might go further and say that he thought that the terms 'rest' and 'motion' could arbitrarily be used to describe the same mode or perfection. Consider, for instance, a car travelling from Pittsburgh to New York. Descartes would maintain that one can describe the car as in motion, if one sees the earth as at rest. Alternatively, one can also describe the car as being at rest and the earth as in motion. Thus, whether we see the car as in motion or at rest is an arbitrary matter.) Thus, Descartes is merely using the example of rest and movement, as in the case of heat and cold, as an illustration of the point that some perceptions are of absences of perfections, rather than perfections.
19 The comparison between finitude and infinitude differs from the comparison between rest and movement, or darkness and light in this sense. The latter involve a comparison between a mode of substance (the least form of reality) and an absence of that mode. The former involves a comparison between two forms of being – a finite substance and an infinite substance. But the point made is essentially the same: just as the perception of the lack of a mode presupposes some idea of the mode itself, so the perception of finite substance as lacking many perfections presupposes some idea of the perfections that are lacking in finite substance, and to be found in infinite substance (which are these perfections rolled into one).
20 See note 16 of Chapter 3. Descartes is certain that the clear and distinct idea of God contains objective reality while he is inspecting it, prior to the proofs of God's existence and non-deception. After these proofs, he would have lasting and stable knowledge that this is the case (in contexts where AA operates as an account of representation).

5 Falsehood, Error and Ethics

1 Descartes seems to make a distinction between *nihil* (which is indeclinable) and *nihilum* (which is second declension neuter) in the *Meditations*. By and large, he reserves the term *nihilum* for those cases where 'nothing' carries a connotation of deficiency, and *nihil* for those cases where it does not.

2 The account I give here of the views in *De genesi contra Manicheos* comes substantially from Colish's paper (Colish 1984). My discussions concerning Augustine in this chapter have been greatly helped by Colish's discussion.

3 That this is the case might resolve an apparent puzzle. Descartes accepts that, ontologically speaking, actual modes in a finite substance are less perfect than finite substances themselves, which are in turn less perfect than infinite substance. But one can then ask: what about the perfections or modes of an infinite substance (such as omniscience and omnipotence)? Are they more perfect than the modes of finite substances? Where do they rank on the ontological ladder of perfection?

If the above account is correct, then the answer to these questions is simple. There are no modes or separable perfections in God. This is because there is in effect only one single invariable absolute perfection (infinite power, understanding rolled into one). This single perfection *is* God and therefore sits right on top of the metaphysical scale as infinite substance.

4 I thank Gerald Massey for pointing out to me this conception of privation.

5 The labelling of the three arguments considered here follow closely those by Tierno (1997: 57, 62, 71).

6 In the Fourth Meditation, Descartes claims that our imperfections contribute to the *greater* perfection of the universe, not that our imperfections contribute to the *best possible* universe (or the universe with the greatest perfection). That he puts his claim thus is presumably due to the fact that, owing to the absolute freedom of the Cartesian God, there is no *one* best possible universe. There could be a variety of best possible universes that God could have realized if God had willed into being different laws of logic and standards of goodness.

That Descartes assumes in the Fourth Meditation that this universe is the best possible *given the laws and standards that God did will into being* is indicated by his remark: 'I do not know that I laid it down that God always does what he knows to be the most perfect, and it does not seem to me that a finite mind can judge of that [that is, the finite mind can ever have an adequate grasp that this is the case, since it cannot comprehend God's inscrutable purposes.] But I tried to solve the difficulty in question, about the cause of error, on the assumption that God made the world most perfect, since if one makes the opposite assumption, the difficulty disappears altogether' (AT 4: 113, CSMK: 232). Evidently, then, the Fourth Meditation, and what comes after, assumes that God did make the best possible universe (given the available laws and standards of goodness) – and tries to resolve how error is possible given that this is the case (see Newman 1999: 571n for an interesting discussion of the issue).

7 For example, Tierno apparently construes the principle in this way. See Tierno 1997: 64ff.

8 Hick notes that Descartes and Augustine are two of a number of distinguished proponents who accept the aesthetic model of the universe (Hick 1966: 44). However, he does not examine the similarity between Descartes's and Augustine's position in particular.

9 Augustine himself offers some answer to this question, at least with respect to the question of why we should strive for freedom from sin. He argues that while creatures who have the freedom to sin would contribute to the overall perfection of the universe, sin itself does not contribute to the overall perfection. But Descartes apparently does not take this line in the Fourth Meditation, for he never specifically argues there that, while error-proneness contributes to overall perfection, error itself does not.

10 Commentators have discussed at length whether *all* truths of reason are to be included among those that God could have made not true. The principal question here is of course whether truths of reason that pertain to God's essence could have been made not true (see,

for instance, Bennett 1994, Curley 1984). But it is evident that, at the least, the truths of reason that do not pertain to God's essence need not have been made as true.

11 Any recognition of God's existence as the 'first' eternal truth (on which all other such truths depend) must similarly be accomplished within the finite perspective.

12 If Marion is right in holding that the various 'names' of God are inconsistent with each other (see Marion 1999b: 270ff), then this would be another tension irresolvable from our finite perspective.

13 In maintaining this, I depart from the position I endorsed in an earlier paper (Wee 2002a). Descartes may not perhaps have held E_1 consistently, but there is good evidence he did hold it.

14 That Descartes assigns a crucial role to the passion of *générosité* in his ethics may also reinforce that the Cartesian ethical life is not primarily other-regarding. *Générosité* was the central motive of the warrior ethic, and referred to the 'strong sense of one's own worth and honour which pushed men . . . to do great things' (Taylor, 1989: 153). For Descartes, too, *générosité* involves having the sense of self-esteem and dignity that fuels a commitment to the ethical life. *Générosité* has two components: recognizing that one has complete freedom of will and feeling a 'firm and constant resolution to use [this freedom] well'. Such *générosité* enables 'a person's self-esteem to be as great as it may legitimately be' (AT 11: 445–6, CSM 1: 384). Descartes's portrayal of *générosité* suggests that this passion – so crucial to the ethical life – is not other-directed.

15 Indeed, the list of Aristotelian virtues (such as liberality and munificence) presupposes such flourishing external circumstances.

16 CSMK indicate that the source of this passage is Virgil's *Aeneid*, IX, 427.

17 Marshall maintains that Descartes in this passage 'expresses the view that our state, our society and our family are objects that merit our love and that they are parts of the union formed by love that warrant our sacrifice' (Marshall 1998: 139). But Descartes does not state in the passage that we should love our state, society and family, only that 'it is a truth important to know' that we are parts of these larger wholes and that the interests of these wholes should take precedence over ours. There is no injunction in the passage to love these larger wholes.

18 Descartes's claim that the interests of these orders should take precedence over one's own is a qualified one, as the next section will show.

19 In a recent paper (Wee 2001), I argue that, while Descartes advocates the mastery of the physical world through an understanding of its laws and structures (and may also accept that one can judiciously use the 'fruits of the earth'), this does not imply that he sanctions the exploitation and plunder of the physical world for human benefit.

20 The account here would also explain why Descartes accords virtue the status of 'supreme good'. This is because virtue is essentially the resolute pursuit of the other goods (one's own health, friend's interests and so on) in accord with reason.

21 This of course assumes that one accepts that reason is able to point out ends that we should pursue. If one has an instrumental view of reason, then reason can only subserve the independent ends of the agent.

22 When he tells Elizabeth that reason's function in the conduct of life is to examine the value of the perfections that we can acquire, Descartes contrasts the passions unfavourably with reason:

> [The passions] all represent the goods to which they tend with greater splendour than they deserve, and they make us imagine pleasures to be much greater, before we possess them, than our subsequent experiences show them to be.
>
> (AT 4: 285, CSMK: 264)

For Descartes, reason represents the value of the perfections to be pursued correctly, and unbridled passions represent their value incorrectly. This again indicates that there is an authority independent of reason (namely, God) that determines the value of the goods.

6 Conclusion

1 The 2004 APA Pacific Division Meeting includes two papers, one specifically on material falsity in Cartesian ideas, and one on error and sensory ideas. See also De Rosa 2004.

2 Carraud draws here from a discussion in Armogathe 1979. Note that while this book considers in some detail Descartes's views in relation to his predecessors, it is less concerned with how Descartes *looks forward to* and anticipates the views of successors such Baruch Spinoza and Nicolas Malebranche. The latter is surely also a worthwhile enterprise, and one worth looking into.

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